

Wednesday 12/16/20

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.

'Major Leap': US Air Force Uses AI to Copilot Military Plane for First Time in History - Photos by [Mary F.](#)

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to the ability of machines to conduct tasks that usually require human intelligence, such as learning from experience, making predictions, recognizing patterns and other problem-solving functions.

The US Air Force (USAF) has revealed it used AI on a military aircraft for the first time ever during a training flight this week.

In a [Tuesday news release](#), the USAF confirmed that an AI algorithm was used to control the sensor and navigation systems of a U-2 Dragon Lady reconnaissance plane during a training flight at Beale Air Force Base in California.

The aircraft used during the test is assigned to the 9th Reconnaissance Wing at the air base and is a single-jet engine, high-altitude craft that provides all-weather intelligence gathering. "This flight marks a major leap forward for national defense as artificial intelligence took flight aboard a military aircraft for the first time in the history of the Department of Defense. The AI algorithm, developed by Air Combat Command's U-2 Federal Laboratory, trained the AI to execute specific in-flight tasks that would otherwise be done by the pilot," the USAF wrote in the release.

"The flight was part of a specifically constructed scenario pitting the AI against another dynamic computer algorithm in order to prove both the new technology capability, and its ability to work in coordination with a human," the release added.

According to the Air Force, the AI system, named ARTUμ, was used for "sensor employment and tactical navigation." The system's main responsibility was identifying enemy launchers. The plane was still steered by the pilot, and no weapons were involved. However, after takeoff, sensor control was handled by ARTUμ, which had learned how to achieve sensor objectives from "over a half-million computer-simulated training iterations."

"We know that in order to fight and win in a future conflict with a peer adversary, we must have a decisive digital advantage," Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr. said in the release. "AI will play a critical role in achieving that edge, so I'm incredibly proud of what the team accomplished. We must accelerate change and that only happens when our Airmen push the limits of what we thought was possible."

The AI technology was designed to be easily transferable to other systems and is expected to transform air and space domains, the release notes.

"Blending expertise of a pilot with capabilities of machine learning, this historic flight directly answers the National Defense Strategy's call to invest in autonomous systems," Secretary of the Air Force Barbara Barrett noted. "Innovations in artificial intelligence will transform both the air and space domains."

According to an article by [Popular Mechanics](#), ARTUμ is based on an open-source software algorithm called μZero. The publicly accessible algorithm was designed by the AI research company DeepMind, which is owned by Google parent company Alphabet, [the Washington Post 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.

Health Worker in Alaska Experiences Serious Allergic Reaction to Pfizer's COVID-19 Vaccine - Reports
by [Mary F.](#)

On December 11, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued the first emergency use authorization for a COVID-19 vaccine to a drug produced by Pfizer and BioNTech. Last week, the vaccine started being administered in the UK. US health care workers began receiving the vaccine this week.

A health worker in Alaska reportedly had a serious allergic reaction after receiving Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine on Tuesday. According to three people familiar with the unidentified individual's health, the health worker was hospitalized after receiving the vaccine, [according to the New York Times](#). The individual, who had no history of drug or any other types of allergies, was still in the hospital under observation as of Wednesday morning.

Officials believe that the health worker's reaction to the vaccine is similar to the anaphylactic reactions two health workers in Britain experienced after receiving the same vaccine last week. Anaphylaxis is a life-threatening event that involves impaired breathing and a drop in blood pressure seconds or minutes after exposure to an allergen.

Both health workers in Britain, who have since recovered, had a history of allergic reactions. In fact, both people, a 49-year-old woman with a history of egg allergies and a 40-year-old woman with allergies to several different types of medications, carried EpiPen-like devices to inject themselves with epinephrine, which helps relax muscles blocking airways, in the event that they experienced allergic reactions.

After the two health workers in Britain suffered reactions from the vaccine, Dr. June Raine, chief executive of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) in the United Kingdom, released new guidance related to the Pfizer vaccine.

"We have this evening (Wednesday 9 December 2020) issued updated guidance to COVID-19 vaccination centers about the management of anaphylaxis," [the statement reads](#). "Any person with a history of anaphylaxis to a vaccine, medicine or food should not receive the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. A second dose should not be given to anyone who has experienced anaphylaxis following administration of the first dose of this vaccine. Anaphylaxis is a known, although very rare, side effect with any vaccine. Most people will not get anaphylaxis, and the benefits in protecting people against COVID-19 outweigh the risks".

The FDA has also warned people with allergies to consult their doctors to ensure they are not allergic to any components of the vaccine before receiving it.

“Do not administer Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine to individuals with known history of a severe allergic reaction (e.g., anaphylaxis) to any component of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine,” [the FDA writes in its guidance](#).

The Trump administration is currently negotiating with Pfizer to secure more COVID-19 vaccines for the US this spring in addition to the 100 million the company has already pledged to supply, federal health officials confirmed Wednesday. Over the weekend, the company began shipping [over 180,000 doses](#) of the vaccine across 50 states.

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said he is “very optimistic” about negotiations, [the Washington Post reported](#).

“We are working with them to provide them whatever assistance now that they have identified some of the production challenges they got,” Azar noted at a Wednesday briefing.

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.

Astronomers Discover Bizarre Exoplanet That Behaves Like Elusive Planet Nine
by [Mary F.](#)

Astronomers have yet to find Planet Nine, a hypothetical planet in the outer region of the solar system. According to some scientists’ calculations, this hypothetical planet could have a mass of about 10 times that of Earth and an elongated orbit 20 times farther from the sun on average than Neptune.

In a new [study](#) published in The Astronomical Journal, researchers outline novel information about an exoplanet, known as HD 106906 b, that appears to behave similarly to the [elusive Planet Nine](#).

Although HD 106906 b was first discovered in 2013 using the Magellan Telescopes at the Las Campanas Observatory in Chile’s Atacama Desert, astronomers only recently discovered information about the planet’s orbit using the Hubble Space Telescope, which was launched into low Earth orbit in 1990. The recent study reveals that HD 106906 b is 336 light-years from Earth and orbits around a pair of host stars. The exoplanet is also massive, with a size 11 times that of Jupiter.

“The exoplanet resides extremely far from its host pair of bright, young stars — more than 730 times the distance of Earth from the Sun. This wide separation made it enormously challenging to determine the 15,000-year-long orbit in such a short time span of Hubble observations. The planet is creeping very slowly along its orbit, given the weak gravitational pull of its very distant parent stars,” the Hubble Space Telescope facility [explained in a news release](#).

Astronomers were also surprised to learn that the exoplanet has an elongated and inclined orbit, which is unlike any of the other known planets in our solar system.

“To highlight why this is weird, we can just look at our own solar system and see that all of the planets lie roughly in the same plane,” the study’s lead author, Meiji Nguyen of the University of California, Berkeley, said in a statement, the release noted. “It would be bizarre if, say, Jupiter just happened to be inclined 30 degrees relative to the plane that every other planet orbits in.

This raises all sorts of questions about how HD 106906 b ended up so far out on such an inclined orbit.”

Researchers believe that the exoplanet may have formed close to its host stars. However, drag over time caused the exoplanet’s orbit to decay, which caused it to “migrate inward” toward the stars.

“The gravitational forces from the whirling twin stars then kicked it out onto an eccentric orbit that almost threw it out of the system and into the void of interstellar space. Then a star passed very close by to this system, stabilizing the exoplanet’s orbit and preventing it from leaving its home system,” the Hubble Space Telescope news release explains.

This same theory may also be used to explain what caused the hypothetical Planet Nine to be pushed to the outskirts of the solar system. The planet could have been formed in the inner solar system before being pushed out by interactions with Jupiter. Because interactions with Jupiter may have pushed Planet Nine far beyond Pluto, the prevailing theory is that passing stars may have stabilized the orbit of Planet Nine by moving its orbital path away from Jupiter and the solar system's other planets.

“It’s as if we have a time machine for our own solar system going back 4.6 billion years to see what may have happened when our young solar system was dynamically active and everything was being jostled around and rearranged,” explained research team member Paul Kalas.

Astronomers plan to further study HD 106906 b to learn more about how it was formed.

“Despite the lack of detection of Planet Nine to date, the orbit of the planet can be inferred based on its effect on the various objects in the outer solar system,” study co-author Robert De Rosa noted. “This suggests that if a planet was indeed responsible for what we observe in the orbits of trans-Neptunian objects it should have an eccentric orbit inclined relative to the plane of the solar system. This prediction of the orbit of Planet Nine is similar to what we are seeing with HD 106906 b.”

The search for Planet Nine began in 2014 after [astronomers Chad Trujillo and Scott Sheppard](#) suggested that a large and unseen planet may exist beyond Neptune and that such a planet may be causing gravitational oddities in the orbits of distant objects like the dwarf planets Sedna and 2012 VP113.

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.

WHO to Send Investigative Team to Wuhan in January to Trace COVID-19 Origins - Report by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A year after the outbreak that initiated the COVID-19 pandemic, doubt has been cast from several directions on the prevailing consensus that the virus originated in a wet market in central China, with several theories suggesting it arrived in Wuhan from another source.

Members of the World Health Organization (WHO) and diplomats from several nations [told Reuters on Wednesday that an international investigative team](#) would be dispatched to Wuhan, China, early next year to investigate the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that has caused the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the report, the team of 12 to 15 members will arrive in China's central Hubei Province in the first week of January 2021 to try and figure out the source of the virus, which is believed to have originated in a food market that sold live animals, and how it crossed the species barrier to infect humans.

Their mission will be six weeks long, including two weeks of quarantine immediately after their arrival.

The disease was first noted in December 2019 as a new type of pneumonia, but was not sequenced and identified as a unique illness until January 2020, by which time it had infected tens of thousands of people, mostly in Hubei Province. Despite Chinese lockdown measures, some people infected with the virus managed to travel internationally, beginning the spread of the disease that became a full-fledged pandemic just two months later.

Keith Hamilton, an expert at the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) who will take part in the investigation, told Reuters that finding the animal source of the virus would be "rather like looking for a needle in a haystack." However, scientists have found an almost identical virus in a horseshoe bat, indicating that might be the source.

Peter Ben Embarek, the WHO's top expert in animal diseases, has dismissed any notion it was man-made or was released from a lab, [a conspiracy theory promulgated by such people](#) as US President Donald Trump earlier this year.

In 2017, Chinese scientists traced the origins of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), which caused an epidemic outbreak between 2002 and 2004 that killed close to 800 people, [to a species of cave-dwelling horseshoe bat in Yunnan Province](#). When COVID-19 first appeared, Chinese doctors thought it was another outbreak of SARS-CoV-1, which caused SARS. However, reporters at Chinese state outlet Global Times have recently suggested the virus could have come to China from elsewhere, arriving in frozen food shipments, since most of the products sold at the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market are not live, but frozen.

"The frequent outbreaks originating from imported cold-chain products since June in many places in China also beg the question among Wuhan locals if the virus was transmitted to Wuhan in this way," [the Times wrote, noting the hypothesis was also supported](#) by Wu Zunyou, the chief epidemiologist of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Wu also said that the fact that seafood has caused flare-ups in Beijing, Dalian and Qingdao also raised the question whether the early outbreak in Wuhan was also triggered by imported seafood. 'This gives us a lead, a new way of thinking,' said the top epidemiologist."

The Reuters report made no mention of US involvement in the Wuhan mission. In April, [Trump accused the WHO of "mismanaging the crisis,"](#) saying the UN agency was controlled by China and that Beijing had lied to it about its case numbers. In September, Trump announced he was pulling the US out of the international medical network, effective on July 6, 2021. US President-elect [Joe Biden has said he will rejoin the WHO as soon](#) as he is inaugurated, but his swearing-in will take place several weeks after the WHO mission begins.

If the WHO mission to Wuhan fails to turn up answers, scientists may be headed to Italy next. [Last month, Milan's National Cancer Institute published](#) a report which found that dozens of people enrolled in a lung cancer screening trial had developed SARS-CoV-2 [antibodies well before the first known COVID-19 case](#) arrived in Italy on February 21, 2020. Some of those antibodies were found in blood samples taken in October 2019, meaning they must have been infected in September 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.

'Anti-China Syndrome': Beijing Fires Back After Taiwan Bans Children's Book on Wuhan COVID-19 Fight
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan claimed China had kept the autonomous island in the dark about the outbreak in Wuhan, which the US later seized on to argue China purposefully allowed the virus to escape and reach pandemic levels.

After Taipei banned a children's book from the mainland about China's struggle to contain the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan earlier this year, Beijing fired back, accusing Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of having an "anti-China syndrome."

Earlier this month, the Taiwanese Ministry of Culture banned the book "[Waiting for Dad to Come Home.](#)" a picture book originally printed on the Chinese mainland but subsequently reprinted by a Taiwanese publisher.

The book tells the story of a Chinese boy in Wuhan whose father is a doctor. After he is sent to treat COVID-19 patients at the hospital, he is unable to spend the Lunar New Year holiday with his family. His mother teaches him about the responsibility of medics and the need to combat the virus, and they later visit his dad in the hospital - separated by a glass wall, of course. The son tells the father he supports him and will wait for him to come home.

It's a real situation that unfolded in China this past January, when the Chinese government made the tough decision to [cancel the huge traditional Lunar New Year celebrations](#) on January 25 in a bid to stem the spread of the newly identified SARS-CoV-2 virus. Tens of thousands of doctors from across China, including in the People's Liberation Army, mobilized to go to Hubei to treat sufferers of the new disease, and [construction crews worked around the clock to build new hospitals](#) in just a matter of days.

[According to Taiwan's Central News Agency \(CNA\)](#), furor surrounding the book erupted late last month when Chen E-jun, a Taipei city councilor, denounced the book as Chinese propaganda. She noted that the words "Go China" and "Go Wuhan" appear on pages of the book, as do pictures of Chinese military aircraft.

"This children's book highlights the fact that the Chinese government is rewriting history, burying the truth about this global health crisis and shirking responsibility for the pandemic," Chen said, according to CNA.

Soon, DPP legislators found out about the book and got it removed from public libraries across the country, and the Ministry of Culture banned the book, saying its publishers had not received the necessary permits to print books originally printed in the mainland.

Zhu Fenglian, spokesperson for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, [told China Global Television Network on Wednesday](#) the move reflected an "anti-China syndrome" that made some Taiwanese leaders fear anything from the mainland.

"I just don't understand why some people in Taiwan use a book, which plants the seeds of love and courage in the hearts of children, helping them know the meaning of mutual support, as the weapon to attack the Chinese mainland," Zhu said.

"They politicize and stigmatize anything related to the mainland, trying to stir up 'anti-China' sensations on the island. What are they afraid of? They are afraid that people on both sides of the Taiwan Straits will get closer to each other. They are afraid that people in Taiwan will know the real situation on the mainland, and the lies they've worked so hard to fabricate will be exposed. But such an unconscionable operation is doomed to fail," she added.

Taiwan is formally known as the Republic of China, the last remnant of the Chinese government that ruled the entire country from 1912 until 1949, when it was defeated by the communist Red Army on the mainland and the People's Republic of China was founded in Beijing. Both governments claim to be the sole legitimate representative of the Chinese people, but all but a couple nations have switched their recognition from Taipei to Beijing in the decades since the civil war ended.

Relations between the two governments have remained tense, as Beijing regards Taiwan as a rebellious province, and the United States has vastly increased the military support it passes to Taiwan, despite strong objections from the mainland.

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.

Israel-Morocco Peace Deal Likely to Push Other Maghrebi Nations Away from US Bloc
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Muslim nations of North Africa have long been split on political issues, but remained united for decades in their opposition to Israel. However, with Morocco's recent decision to recognize Israel, the entire political geography of the region could be thrown into disarray.

Last week, US President Donald Trump announced he had [mediated a peace deal between Morocco and Israel](#). In exchange for Rabat's agreement to become the seventh Arab state to extend political recognition of Israel's existence, Washington gave recognition to Morocco's claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara.

While the move might have brought Morocco further into the US bloc, the deal is likely to push the remaining states of the Maghreb region even further away.

The US' move was highly disputed by other [world powers, including the United Kingdom and Russia, which both condemned the move](#) as a violation of international law. The United Nations has recognized the Polisario Front as the diplomatic representatives of the native Saharawi people and created a special mission - the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, or MINURSO - to oversee an independence referendum in the territory. As recently as October, the US even voted to extend MINURSO's mission for another year. Across North Africa, regional states have similarly decried the move and dismissed suggestions they may also be preparing to break the 1967 Khartoum Resolution and recognize Israel's existence.

Algeria

On Saturday, Algerian Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad condemned the move as destabilizing the region. "Foreign operations are taking place outside our borders with the aim of destabilizing Algeria," [he said according to the Algerian newspaper La Patrie](#), adding that Algerians would unite to "face the multiple dangers that threaten our country."

Moreover, earlier this year, when the United Arab Emirates announced its peace deal with Israel, Algerian President Abdelmadjid [Tebboune unequivocally stated Algeria "will not participate in it."](#) accept it or bless it.

"The Palestine cause is sacred, and we will not give it up," he added.

In this Friday, June 3, 2016 file photo, members of the Polisario Front, the organization disputing sovereignty over Western Sahara with Morocco, mourn their leader, Mohamed Abdelaziz, during his funerals held in the Rabouni refugees camp, south western Algeria. Algeria's Tindouf Province is also home to several Saharawi refugee camps, and Algiers has long recognized the Polisario Front's claims to represent Saharawis. [According to the CIA World Factbook](#), there are believed to be 100,000 Saharawi refugees in Tindouf.

Algiers was already growing closer to Moscow, having agreed to a \$2 billion deal [to buy 14 of Russia's new Su-57 stealth aircraft](#). This is in addition to other recent purchases of Russian Su-33 and Su-34 fighter aircraft, and [according to Menadefense, was made in response to Morocco's August purchase of 25 F-16V "Viper" fighters from the United States.](#)

Tunisia

On Monday, [Tunisian Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi told France24](#) that Tunis would not be following in Rabat's footsteps either.

"For Tunisia, the question is not on the agenda," Mechichi said. "Every country has its own reality, its own truth and its own diplomacy, which it considers best for its people. We respect Morocco's choice, Morocco is a sister country that we love very much."

However, some voices in Tunisia have also criticized Polisario as well as Algeria's support for Saharawis in recent days.

Just days before the Morocco-Israel peace deal was announced, Moncef Marzouki, Tunisia's first democratically-elected president, [suggested Saharawi refugees should move to Morocco](#) and "forget the whims of a Saharawi state." He also accused Algeria of holding "100 million Maghreb citizens hostage" because of 100,000 Saharawi "separatists."

Former Tunisian Foreign Minister Ahmed Ounaies has also aroused anger by blaming Algiers for the entire affair, telling a local radio station: "Algeria played with fire and caused Morocco to accelerate the process of normalizing relations with Israel and the division of the Maghreb region," [according to Middle East Eye](#).

The comments reportedly required special smoothing over by Tunis' present foreign minister, Othman Jerandi, who assured Algiers that was not Mechichi's position.

Libya

When Muammar Gaddafi came to power in 1973, Tripoli severed its relations with Israel, and they have never been resumed. However, his overthrow in 2011 and the subsequent civil war have brought new confusion to the issue.

On the one hand, Mohamed Amari Zayed, a member of the Libyan President Council, [told Al Jazeera in August, when news of the forthcoming UAE-Israel peace deal was announced](#), that the agreement was "a betrayal" and "another stab in the back" to the Muslim community.

On the other, [Turkey's Anadolu Agency reported just days prior](#) that eastern Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, who heads the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army in rebellion against the UN-recognized government in Tripoli, had been meeting with Israel's Mossad military intelligence agency for years and that Jerusalem hoped to gain by Haftar's overthrow of the Tripoli government.

Mauritania

Nouakchott once recognized Israel's existence, but severed relations in the wake of the 2008 war on Gaza. So far, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania has said little about Morocco's recent deal, but after the UAE's peace deal with Israel [in September, the Mauritanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said](#) it trusted the "wisdom and good judgment" of the Emirati leadership in making the decision.

Geoffrey Porter, the CEO of North Africa Risk Consulting, [told Turkish Radio and Television News at the time](#) that it was unlikely Mauritanian President Mohammed Ould Ghazouani would risk the "considerable headache" normalization would bring from Tewassoul, a Muslim Brotherhood-aligned party in opposition to his government.

Still, the UAE exerts considerable influence over Mauritanian affairs, thanks to billions of dollars in investment Abu Dhabi has sunk into the Sahelian state in recent years, and Nouakchott could well be eager to improve relations with Morocco as well.

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.

'We Want Them Infected': Trump Health Aide Pushed Letting Millions Get COVID-19 for 'Herd Immunity'

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As the first vaccinations in the US begin for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, amid hundreds of thousands of deaths from the disease, new documents from the outgoing Trump administration reveal that the catastrophic rise in cases in recent months could have been part of a deliberate policy decision.

Internal Trump administration [emails obtained by Politico have revealed](#) that a top health adviser repeatedly urged the purposeful spread of COVID-19 among millions of people. The same adviser was revealed months ago to have pressured the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to change its long-standing position on the safety of reopening schools during the same time period.

'Let the Kids and Young Folk Get Infected'

This past July, then-science adviser Paul Alexander spared no effort badgering the Trump administration about the need to relax social distancing restrictions and allow COVID-19 to spread, saying it would create a "herd immunity" to the virus.

"There is no other way, we need to establish herd, and it only comes about allowing the non-high risk groups expose themselves to the virus. PERIOD," Alexander wrote in a July 4 email to his boss, the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) assistant secretary for

public affairs, Michael Caputo, and six other senior officials. The [email was one of several obtained](#) by Politico and printed in a Wednesday story.

"Infants, kids, teens, young people, young adults, middle aged with no conditions etc. have zero to little risk so we use them to develop herd ... we want them infected," Alexander urged, adopting [a talking point pushed by Trump since at least May](#) but that is not supported by data, as the Associated Press demonstrated.

In another email sent to the Food and Drug Administration commissioner, Stephen Hahn, Caputo and eight other senior officials, Alexander urged that "[I]t may be that it will be best if we open up and flood the zone and let the kids and young folk get infected" in order to get 'natural immunity...natural exposure.'" According to Politico, which cited emails obtained by the House Oversight Committee's select subcommittee on coronavirus, Caputo asked Alexander to research the idea.

That same day, Alexander complained to CDC Director Robert Redfield in a separate email that "we essentially took off the battlefield the most potent weapon we had...younger healthy people, children, teens, young people who we needed to fastly [sic] infect themselves, spread it around, develop immunity, and help stop the spread."

In another July 24 email of which Politico did not name the recipients, Alexander made clear that he knew relaxing social distancing restrictions would cause a rise in cases.

A DHHS spokesperson told Politico that Alexander's demands for herd immunity had no influence on department strategy, and a senior administration official told the outlet, "His rants had zero impact on policy and communications. Caputo enabled him to opine, but people pushed back and it even got to a point where Caputo told him to stop sending the emails." However, Kyle McGowan, who at the time was CDC chief of staff, told Politico, "It was understood that he [Alexander] spoke for Michael Caputo, who spoke for the White House."

CDC Bows to Pressure From Trump, Alexander

Indeed, Alexander did more than just shout into the void: in September, he successfully pressured the CDC to alter the title of a scientific report on the pediatric death rate of COVID-19, concealing its effects on school-age groups.

For example, the September 15 report's title saw the words "children, adolescents, and young adults" dropped from the headline and replaced with the word "persons," which conveys no information about the age group studied. The word "pediatric," used in the medical field to refer to subjects under 21 years of age, [was removed entirely, according to Politico](#).

His ideas also clearly held sway with leading administration figures. [On July 8, Trump began putting intense pressure](#) on top public health experts to relax their recommendations for how US schools could safely reopen without causing COVID-19 to spread.

Denouncing the CDC's "very tough and expensive guidelines for opening schools," Trump tweeted, "While they want them open, they are asking schools to do very impractical things. I will be meeting with them!!!"

That same day, the US Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, who threatened to withhold federal funding from schools that refused to fully reopen, [told Fox News' Tucker Carlson that](#) "There is no excuse for schools not to reopen again and for kids to be able to learn again full time. The data doesn't suggest anything different." She noted a recent DoE-funded report that she claimed supported her statement.

Just hours after Trump's tweet, US Vice President Mike Pence told reporters at a press conference that the CDC would issue new recommendations the following week. In fact, it was two weeks later: on July 24, the same day Alexander shot off emails across Washington urging allowing children to become COVID-19 vectors, that the CDC dramatically reversed its recommendations, saying that schools must reopen in the fall semester.

"Reopening schools creates opportunity to invest in the education, well-being, and future of one of America's greatest assets - our children - while taking every precaution to protect students, teachers, staff and all their families," [the new CDC statement read - an almost direct parroting](#) of the DeVos statement and in direct contradiction to previous CDC recommendations that schools be ready to totally close for several days at a time if even a single case was detected among students or staff.

Case Increase Follows Reopening

In the United States, public schools typically end their summer break in the last week of August or the first week of September, and after the jockeying over safety rules, many state schools opened their doors more or less on time, although many others enacted either partial reopenings or elected to have kids stay home and perform their first school semesters remotely.

[According to CDC data, the US hit its lowest](#) seven-day moving average for daily new COVID-19 cases since June on September 13: 35,477 cases. After that, new cases sharply rose, and, on December 15, the seven-day average stood at a staggering 211,356 new cases each day.

A total of 16.5 million Americans have contracted the virus - [10 million more than recorded on 1 September](#) - and over 302,000 Americans have died in the pandemic to date.

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 Justice Department to Unseal Charges Against New Suspect in 1988 Lockerbie Plane Bombing - Report
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The December 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 killed 270 individuals, including 190 Americans, when a device planted inside a cassette player exploded and saw the Boeing 727 disintegrate over Lockerbie, Scotland, less than an hour after takeoff from London's Heathrow Airport. This coming Monday marks the 32nd anniversary of the incident.

Prosecutors with the US Department of Justice are expected to unseal charges in the coming days against a suspect they believed played a pivotal role in the 1988 bombing, according to sources familiar with the development.

Citing senior department officials, [the Wall Street Journal reported Wednesday](#) that the individual to be charged is alleged bomb expert Abu Agila Mohammad Masud, who prosecutors claim constructed the bomb and placed it inside the suitcase that was stowed on the Pan Am flight.

Although charges have yet to be officially unsealed, the Journal notes that Masud “faces charges of destruction of an aircraft resulting in death and destruction of a vehicle of interstate commerce resulting in death.”

Masud is said to be in the custody of Libyan officials; however, it's unclear if any extradition requests have been officially issued. His last known location was a Libyan prison, where he was serving time for unrelated offenses.

The case was filed in the US attorney's office in Washington, DC, and is reportedly based on confessions Masud allegedly gave to Libyan officials in 2012 that were later turned over to Scottish authorities in 2017, along with Masud's travel records.

[According to the New York Times](#), the case was also fueled by discoveries made by journalist Ken Dornstein, whose brother was aboard Flight 103. Dornstein launched his own investigation into the bombing and eventually reached out to the FBI in 2012 with a new lead on a potential suspect: Masud. Dornstein described Masud to the Times as a ghostly figure, as the Libyan government had denied his existence for years despite the fact that his name had previously emerged during trials related to the bombing.

Dornstein later discovered that Masud had also been allegedly involved in the 1986 disco bombing in West Berlin that killed two American soldiers.

To date, former Libyan intelligence official Abdel Basset al-Megrahi has been the only person convicted for the bombing; the second suspect, Al-Amin Khalifa Fhimah, was acquitted. Megrahi was convicted in 2001 and given a life sentence in prison, but was ultimately handed a compassionate release after he was diagnosed with cancer. He died in 2012, and his family has recently taken up efforts to [appeal his conviction in Scotland](#).

After Megrahi and Fhimah were indicted, trials for the pair were stalled for several years after Libya refused to extradite its two nationals. It wasn't until 1999, after years of stiff economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations and the US, that Libya relented and agreed to have the men stand trial in the Netherlands before Scottish judges. The sanctions were lifted after Libya agreed to a \$2.7 billion compensation deal for the victims' families.

Incidentally, the case may also prove to be of personal significance for US Attorney General Bill Barr, who served in the same role when the 1988 bombing occurred. At the time, Barr vowed that the investigation would continue, and that everyone responsible for the attack would be brought to justice. More recently, during a 2019 memorial service at Arlington National Cemetery, Barr referred to the case as “unfinished business.”

Former special counsel Robert Mueller was also a familiar face in the initial investigation into the bombing. He served as the head of the Justice Department's criminal division during the proceedings.

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.

Twitter Will Start Removing Posts Promoting COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation Amid Pfizer Rollout
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Social media giant Twitter presently requires the removal of tweets that include a variety of false or misleading information regarding SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19; its latest update is an extension of its current policy.

Twitter announced Wednesday that it will begin to double down on its efforts to label and outright remove posts that contain false claims about the novel coronavirus in the coming weeks amid nationwide efforts to dispense the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine.

A [blog post](#) issued by the social media platform states that the new changes will take effect December 21, and that Twitter will “prioritize the removal of the most harmful misleading information, and during the coming weeks, begin to label tweets that contain potentially misleading information about the vaccines.”

The latest policy update stipulates that users may be required to remove their tweets if they promote debunked claims about adverse reactions to COVID-19 vaccines or allegations that the respiratory disease is not real or serious and that vaccines are not necessary.

Additionally, the policy expansion indicates that posts will be axed if they suggest that COVID-19 vaccines are being used to “intentionally cause harm to or control populations, including statements about vaccines that invoke a deliberate conspiracy.”

Efforts to issue labels or warnings on such tweets will be undertaken in early 2021. The company also notes that labeled posts, similar to current flagging practices, may have links added to them leading to “authoritative public health information” to provide additional context on COVID-19.

“We will enforce this policy in close consultation with local, national and global public health authorities around the world, and will strive to be iterative and transparent in our approach,” the announcement concludes.

The company’s expanded policies were released as health care workers across the nation have started to receive and administer COVID-19 vaccinations to frontline workers and nursing home residents and staffers.

The US Food and Drug Administration authorized [Pfizer-BioNtech’s COVID-19 vaccine](#) for use last Friday, prompting the company to begin distributing nearly 3 million doses of its drug to health professionals. Medical reviews of the vaccine have determined it is 95% effective in combating the dangerous virus.

Twitter’s declaration also follows a [similar announcement by Facebook](#) earlier this month that saw the fellow social media platform say that it would begin removing misinformation regarding COVID-19 vaccines.

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.

Americans Working Remotely Are Signing Off Early to Indulge in Happy Hour, Survey Finds by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Stresses associated with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted a sharp spike in alcohol consumption, with one study published in September finding that heavy drinking by women had increased by over 40%.

A [new survey](#) conducted by research company OnePoll recently found that the majority of Americans who have been working remotely since the pandemic was declared have seen their usual alcohol intake rise.

The poll surveyed 2,000 Americans - 800 of whom were over 21 years of age and working remotely - and determined that 46% of remote workers have clocked out of work early in order to down a much-needed drink, whereas 45% of respondents have gone straight to the bottle during working hours.

And while respondents admitted that they were drinking much more than compared to their pre-COVID-19 days, 70% of those polled said the uptick was the result of virtual [happy hours](#) with their fellow coworkers.

To no one's surprise, keeping track of the daily news did not help individuals to abstain from the bubbly. "Over half (52%) of respondents also said that they've felt the need to drink while watching the news this year, and they average about four adult beverages each week," the survey found.

Additionally, pollsters indicated that, aside from drinking, respondents noted that they've also been stress-eating three times a week on average, drinking far too much caffeine and ditching their work attire to lounge in their pajamas all day.

However, thinking of the new year to come, many also stated that they intended to make lifestyle changes to improve their health, such as increasing their intake of fruits and vegetables, beginning meal planning and exercising.

Six in 10 of the adults surveyed said they were going to try and get a jump start on lowering their alcoholic intake for the remainder of 2020, a practice many stated they wanted to maintain for 2021.

OnePoll's findings come after a [RAND Corporation study reported](#) that alcohol consumption across the US has increased by 14% among those over the age of 30, compared to 2019 figures. The national survey, which was conducted between May and June, also indicated that women reported a 41% increase in heavy drinking, episodes involving the consumption of four or more drinks within a span of a couple of hours.

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.

Canada to Send First Canadian Astronaut Into Lunar Orbit for 2023 Artemis Mission
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The US' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) intends to return humans to the moon by 2024 through its Artemis program, a project which in turn will pave the way for the agency's manned missions to Mars.

Canada [announced a landmark agreement](#) with the US on Wednesday that will for the very first time see a Canadian astronaut orbit the moon for a manned 2023 mission as part of NASA's renewed efforts to return to the moon.

Under the deal, one of Canada's four active astronauts will be part of NASA's Artemis II mission, which will be the first crewed mission to reach the moon since the US agency's Apollo 17 expedition; however, the 2023 trip will not include a moon landing.

The signing of the Gateway Treaty, which was announced by Canadian Innovation, Science and Industry Minister Navdeep Bains during a video conference, also confirms that the US' northern neighbor will play a vital role in the eventual [establishment of the Lunar Gateway](#) space station that will orbit the moon.

"All eyes will look to the sky as one of our astronauts becomes the first Canadian to travel around the moon," [Bains said during the conference](#). "Canada will join the US on the first crewed mission to the moon since the Apollo missions."

"This will make Canada only the second country after the US to have an astronaut in deep space," Bains noted, adding that the thought of a Canadian making such a historic leap "fills me with pride."

Canada's four astronauts are David Saint-Jacques, Jeremy Hansen, Jennifer Sidey-Gibbons and Joshua Kutryk. It has not yet been determined which of the astronauts will receive the golden ticket to Earth's natural satellite.

The Artemis mission will include three phases, the first of which will involve an uncrewed maiden flight of the new [Space Launch System and the Orion orbiter](#). The following two phases will involve the 2023 crewed lunar orbit and the crewed landing on the moon in 2024.

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.

California Readies 60 Storage Freezers, Thousands of Body Bags Amid 'Most Intense' COVID-19 Surge
by [Evan Craighead](#)

California's Department of Health recorded 53,711 new COVID-19 cases and at least 293 related deaths on December 15. While the state has begun receiving its first doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, surging cases of the contagious disease continue to contribute to the ballooning death toll, which presently sits at about 21,500 fatalities.

Democratic California Governor Gavin Newsom announced on Tuesday that a total of 5,000 body bags had been distributed to the counties of Los Angeles, San Diego and Inyo.

"There is a light at the end of the tunnel — but we are still in the tunnel," Newsom highlighted during his COVID-19 response briefing. "We're going through perhaps the most intense and urgent moment since the beginning of this pandemic."

The governor detailed that 60 53-foot refrigerated storage units have been reserved by the state. The mobile morgues are on standby in various counties and hospitals across California. The state has averaged 32,352 new [COVID-19](#) cases and 174.6 deaths per day over the last week, according to estimates [provided by the LA Times](#). Comparatively, California's seven-day average for November 14 was 41 deaths.

"This is a deadly disease, and we need to be mindful of where we are," the governor stated.

Newsom's grim warnings were issued alongside the rollout of his "[Vaccinate All 58](#)" campaign, which seeks "collective, inclusive action across all 58 counties to get people vaccinated" for the novel coronavirus.

Essential health care workers and "those among our most vulnerable in long-term care settings" will be given priority for the first doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

The second dose will be administered some three weeks after the first.

"While we have prepared for this surge with beds and equipment, staffing shortages are real and impact our medical system," Newsom emphasized in the announcement, urging Californians to "wear a mask, reduce mixing, stay home, stop the spread and save lives."

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.

Ex-Student Recounts Discrimination by Joseph Epstein, Author of Dr. Jill Biden Op-Ed by [Evan Craighead](#)

Joseph Epstein, a former adjunct English professor at Northwestern University, has fallen into infamy over a recently published Wall Street Journal op-ed that cheekily insists the incoming first lady, Dr. Jill Biden, drop a "fraudulent" doctoral title. Many, including NU, have condemned the 83-year-old writer for being patronizing and sexist.

Dr. Maureen O'Conner, English Department lecturer at the University College Cork, Ireland, [took to Facebook on Sunday](#) to provide a "full account" of her educational experience under the now-notorious essayist.

"[Epstein] NEVER called on the women in class, and spent most class time talking about how amazing he is. I imagine he would use the verb 'regale', clearly thinking he would have been welcomed at the Algonquin Round Table. There was one brave woman who insisted on talking. He ignored her," O'Connor detailed, recounting the atmosphere created by the writer. She highlighted that the course in question was required for her major.

"He rang me in my apartment on a weekend, after we turned in our final essays, demanding to know who had written the essay for me. He asked me several questions about Joyce, about whom I'd written, and kept asking how I knew this or that," O'Connor wrote. "When I started to cry, he said I was getting hysterical and hung up."

The lecturer admittedly described her undergraduate self as "younger than my years and terrified, ignorant of how to stand up for myself." As a result, she contacted "a couple of professors" and asked them to intervene.

"He got back to me to say I seemed to have gotten my little boyfriends (??) [sic] to speak to him," O'Connor detailed. "I got the paper back, with a 'C', and a one-sentence comment: 'This is an A paper, but you and I know why I can't give you an A'."

Allegations laid out in O'Connor's story come in addition to [public outrage surrounding Epstein's op-ed](#), entitled "Is There a Doctor in the White House? Not if You Need an M.D."

"Madame First Lady—Mrs. Biden—Jill—kiddo," opens O'Connor's jocular op-ed, [published on Friday by the Wall Street Journal](#). Epstein suggests that Dr. Biden "drop the doc" and accept a variation of madame first lady or FLOTUS, following the January 20 inauguration.

As if the condescending introduction were not enough, Epstein claimed that Jill Biden, who received a Doctor of Education in educational leadership from the University of Delaware in 2007, obtained her degree due to the "erosion of seriousness and the relaxation of standards in university education."

While Epstein proudly touts that he "taught at Northwestern University for 30 years without a doctorate or any advanced degree," NU was quick to distance itself from him and his present-day allegations.

"Joseph Epstein has not been a lecturer at Northwestern since 2003," the university emphasized in a [December 12 news release](#). "Northwestern is firmly committed to equity, diversity and inclusion, and strongly disagrees with Mr. Epstein's misogynistic views." Doug Emhoff, the husband of Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, [indirectly condemned Epstein's op-ed for sexism](#), arguing that such a "story would never have been written about a man."

"Together, we will build a world where the accomplishments of our daughters will be celebrated, rather than diminished," Jill Biden stated, in an apparent reference to Epstein's comments. Paul Gigot, editorial page editor of the WSJ, appeared unbothered by the viral criticism leveled against both Epstein and his employer.

"If you disagree with Mr. Epstein, fair enough. Write a letter or shout your objections on Twitter," [Gigot wrote in his own op-ed addressing the kerfuffle](#). "Epstein's piece was fair comment." According to the WSJ editor, "cancel culture" had influenced NU's public denouncement. "But these pages aren't going to stop publishing provocative essays merely because they offend the new administration or the political censors in the media and academe," Gigot asserted, pledging to keep shaking the proverbial tree.

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.

'Leave Her Alone': AOC, Netizens Rip NY Post For Exposing Medic's OnlyFans Side-Gig by [Evan Craighead](#)

OnlyFans has received a massive boom in traffic within the past year, producing a community of 85 million users and more than a million content creators. The subscription-based adult platform has seen an estimated \$2 billion in sales amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, according to Bloomberg.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) publicly lambasted the New York Post on Sunday in defense of Lauren Kwei, a 23-year-old medic in New York City who chose to become an adult content creator on OnlyFans.

While Kwei is charging \$11.99 a month for her adult content, The Post left nothing to the imagination in their controversial article, entitled ["NYC medic helped 'make ends meet' with racy OnlyFans side gig."](#)

The outlet provided readers with the 23-year-old medic's first, middle and last name, as well as her height, weight and place of employment.

"Leave her alone," Ocasio-Cortez tweeted, adding, "The actual scandalous headline here is 'Medics in the United States need two jobs to survive'".

AOC was hardly alone in defending her fellow New Yorker, as over 370,000 netizens liked the lawmaker's tweet. An additional 7,400 users quote-tweeted their opinions on the controversial article.

"The bottom line: I don't get paid a lot. I'm just trying to make ends meet," Kwei told The Post prior to publication. "I truly don't think this has anything to do with being a paramedic." It appears that the New York Post did not pay the \$11.99 fee to access Kwei's content. Instead, the outlet references using second-hand information from "a subscriber to Kwei's site." Over 2,000 have supported the 23-year-old via her GoFundMe. [According to an update posted in the fundraiser](#), Kwei requested anonymity in relation to the story, but the "newspaper and journalist (male) decided against honoring her request."

While Kwei has received over \$44,000 in pledged donations, her primary job is ultimately now in jeopardy. Termination would mean the 23-year-old would lose "her ability to help support her family," including her "extremely ill" father, according to the fundraising campaign.

The New York Post issued an update, claiming that Kwei scrubbed her OnlyFans of all content on Friday.

"I know SeniorCare would deem this 'inappropriate' so I took it down in the hopes that I won't lose my job in the middle of a pandemic and three weeks before Christmas [sic]," she explained to The Post via a text.

Kwei's transparency was ultimately used against her, as the outlet not only quoted the policy in question, but also issued multiple requests for comment to company representatives.

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.

'Never Regretted One Minute': US Veteran Says Arctic Convoys Became Lifetime Experience

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - US merchant marine veteran Howard Pfeifer, who recently received Russia's Ushakov Medal for participating in the Arctic convoys to bring vital supplies to the Soviet Union during World War II, told Sputnik that he never regretted the rather dangerous and tragic experience.

"I would say without a doubt: I never regretted one minute of this experience," Pfeifer, 97, said in response to a question whether he would repeat the Arctic Convoys experience of 1944 and 1945 from the United States to the north of Russia.

During the war, the United States provided material assistance to the Soviet Union via the North Atlantic, sending resources, provisions and arms to support the military effort against Nazi Germany. The US convoys had to deal with the inhospitable Arctic climate along with German attempts to prevent them from reaching their destination.

HONORED TO RECEIVE A MEDAL FROM RUSSIA

Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a decree directing the Russian Embassy in Washington, DC to award the Ushakov Medal to 17 Americans, including Pfeifer. The medal is

named after Adm. Fyodor Ushakov, the patron saint of the Russian Navy who never lost a battle.

"I am honored to receive the Ushakov award from Russia, and very thankful for the recognition," Pfeifer said.

The veteran, who currently lives with his wife in the US state of Pennsylvania, expressed how proud he is for having the opportunity to serve the United States and its allies, including Russia.

"It was an experience of a lifetime for me," Pfeifer said.

Initially, a special ceremony in honor of Pfeifer was scheduled on December 17 during the meeting of one of the veterans groups, but organizers decided to cancel it due to concerns about the novel coronavirus, so he received the medal by mail.

BECOMING A MERCHANT MARINE

In 1943, Pfeifer was a 20-year-old man contemplating possible careers when his Navy officer cousin advised him to join the merchant marine. Pfeifer said he thought of the idea and then a deep desire was born for him to be enlisted.

"My cousin said: you will be traveling and be in a position where you can somewhat decide where you may go, as oppose to be in a regular Navy or Army. As a merchant marine, you have separate commitments and can somewhat select what do you want to do," Pfeifer said.

Pfeifer explained that being in the merchant marine for a young adult was a kind of romance and confided of dreaming about different countries without quite understanding all the dangers of service during the war.

"It is a very true statement," he said. "I had no idea what I was on in, and what was to take place. My cousin explained to me: 'Every trip that you make is a separate commitment. If you do not like what you are doing, then you will go to another place.'"

Pfeifer said the romantic dream about the merchant marine was broken on the very first day of sailing when he witnessed an explosion on a tanker near his ship.

"My God, it was terrible," he said, noting that the explosion was a result of a German submarine torpedo as the convoy travelled from the United States to Great Britain.

Pfeifer said it was "quite a scary time" in his life when the reality of war sank in and he began to understand how serious the situation was.

"That is the best way to say it. It was something that brought me at attention to what I was involved into. I knew, we had World War going, that was all part of it," he said.

Pfeifer's ship, the Winfred L. Smith, experienced its own problem given that the cargo, including big bombs, was not loaded well and began moving around amid the waves.

"The bombs began moving around, that is why my friend and I went below and had to stabilize the cargo," he said. "When we were done there, we took large pieces of lumber and when the ship rolled, we dropped these large pieces."

LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS

Pfeifer said the ship's crew was not told and did not know the final destination, but sailors did not complain about it.

"That was between the captain and the main officers, who did not give us details of what was happening," Pfeifer said, adding that secrecy was needed in wartime and recalling the proverb "loose lips sink ships."

Pfeifer said sailors did not discuss the areas visible from the ship, but at some point during the trip began to understand they are headed to the Soviet Union.

"As you go day after day, week after week, you can in some ways understand what is happening or what is coming up," he said.

Howard noted that he was a quartermaster who was responsible for steering the ship and this position allowed him to get insight as to what was happening.

GERMAN AIRPLANES ATTACK THE CONVOY

The first Nazi attack against the convoy that resulted in a tanker being hit was not the last one. The group of approximately 45 ships was attacked several times both from the sea and the air. However, Pfeifer said he was not afraid in part because he was inexperienced in warfare.

"Without a doubt, it was a dangerous but interesting time, because I never had this experience in my life. Being a young man, I prayed that we would get through everything [unscathed]," he said.

One of the aerial attacks lasted for two hours and Pfeifer said he remembers it as if it happened yesterday. The German airplanes were on a reconnaissance mission and flew around the convoy, but one came down so close that Pfeifer said he could see the pilot

"I thought, 'Oh, my God.' Of course, he was reporting on what the ships did and what was going on," he said.

Asked on how difficult it was to steer the ship during the attacks and in the Arctic climate, Pfeifer said steering was his job and had to be done.

"I simply had to stay with it, and the officer in charge gave me a command of what I had to do," he said.

A GIFT FROM STALIN

Pfeifer said his convoy of ships, codenamed JW 61, reached Russia's Kola Inlet in late October of 1944 without any losses. Pfeifer noted that he spent there more than two months because the unloading of the munitions took a lot of time.

"We were able to have liberty to go into town and the Soviet authorities told us where we were able to go," he said.

Per the instructions, the US sailors could visit a hotel, a cafe and a place where they could dance. At the same time, the soldiers were strongly encouraged not to go to private homes and get involved with the public.

"They gave 250 rubles to each of us and said: 'This is a present from Stalin for your enjoyment while you are here,'" Pfeifer said, referring to Soviet officials. "They had places where we can eat, they had an orchestra there, we could buy something to drink and we could in fact dance."

Asked if he was happy with the gift, Pfeifer answered by saying he used the money to buy souvenirs.

"I purchased some carvings from marble and wood, and I still have some of them, believe it or not," he said.

Further asked whether he was able to date girls in the Soviet Union, Pfeifer said such acts were off limits. The American sailors were allowed to dance with the Soviet girls but all other contacts with them were restricted.

"The Soviets brought me and others to the main hall and explained that to us. Everything was perfectly clear for me," he said.

BACK TO THE SOVIET UNION

Pfeifer left the Soviet Union in January 1945, but returned with another convoy two months later - this time to the city of Murmansk. His new ship, the David B. Johnson, avoided being damaged in the German attacks, but several vessels in the convoy were destroyed.

"The Nazis knew what we were bringing to Russia and wanted to stop us," he said. "When you bring supplies to the troops, you always have that danger."

In Murmansk, one of the officers from Pfeifer's ship who was Russian-born, asked him to come ashore together. "The Soviets made a big fuss because of this guy," Pfeifer said.

Several months after the war, that officer called Pfeifer and asked to join him on a new ship.

"I said, my sailing is behind me," Pfeifer said, noting that he started a new career in construction that lasted for decades as he formed a family.

Pfeifer, who has 7 children, 8 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren, keeps warm memories of the Russian people.

The veteran emphasized that his communication with the Russian people was a tremendous experience he cherishes.

"Frankly, out of some potentially dumb things I might have done, they were very nice to me in every way. I know very well, they were hardworking people," Pfeifer 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.

Bipartisan Senate Report Claims US Opioid Makers Paid Non-Profit Groups to Boost Sales

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - US opioid manufacturers made payments of at least \$65 million to tax-exempt charities that specialize in pain management to increase sales, according to a report by Senators Chuck Grassley and Ron Wyden.

The senators "identified \$65 million in payments from manufacturers of opioids and opioid-related products (for example, therapies to treat opioid use disorder, opioid overdoses, or opioid-induced constipation) to such groups since 1997, including nearly \$30 million since 2012," the lawmakers said in a report to members of the US Senate Finance Committee on Wednesday.

The report included three case studies identifying the American Chronic Pain Association, Americans for Patient Access and the International Association for the Study of Pain as recipients of opioid makers' largess.

The lawmakers based the report on financial data, including Internal Revenue Service tax forms filed by ten tax exempt groups along with information about their advocacy activities.

The groups helped drive up sales while downplaying the risks of opioid addiction, the report said.

Three Waves of Opioid Overdose Deaths From 1999–2018 killed nearly 450,000 Americans, according to a recent report by the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

In addition, anecdotal evidence suggest the US is experiencing a new wave of opioid overdoses tied to COVID-19 related lockdowns, primarily from black market drugs because a government crackdown imposed restrictions on doctor prescriptions for addictive painkillers, according to media.

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.

Boogaloo Bois Gang Member Pleads Guilty to Aiding Hamas - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A member of the Boogaloo Bois movement in the United States has pleaded guilty to providing material support and weapons to Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement said in a press release.

"US Attorney Erica MacDonald and National Security Division Assistant Attorney General John Demers today announced the guilty plea of Benjamin Ryan Teeter, 22, to conspiracy to provide material support and resources, namely property, services and weapons, to Hamas, a designated foreign terrorist organization," the release said on Wednesday.

The Justice Department said Teeter pleaded guilty before Judge Michael Davis in the US District Court in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and will be sentenced at a later time.

"The defendant was a self-described member of the Boogaloo Bois whose extremist ideologies had moved into the realm of violent action," the release said.

The Boogaloo Bois are a loosely-connected group of individuals who espouse violent anti-government sentiments. The term "Boogaloo" itself references a second civil war in the United States and is associated with violent uprisings against the government, according to the Justice 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.

Top US House Foreign Affairs Lawmakers Accuse Turkey of Undermining NATO

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The chairman and ranking Republican on the US House Foreign Affairs Committee urged other NATO nations to join the US in demanding that Turkey halt actions that damage the Western alliance in a press release.

"While we continue to see real value in a strong US-Turkey relationship, its destabilizing actions need to be more strongly addressed and the United States must work with its European and NATO allies and partners to continue to use all of the tools at their disposal to demand that Turkey reverse course," Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Eliot Engel and ranking Republican Michael McCaul said on Wednesday.

The congressmen also urged Turkey President Recep Erdogan to end his nation's "provocative behavior" so Washington and Ankara can re-establish a cooperative relation based on mutual security interests and democratic values.

The release listed a number of steps by Turkey that the lawmakers said had damaged the alliance, including the nation's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 air and missile defense system, offshore energy exploration in Mediterranean waters claimed by fellow NATO member Greece and Ankara's military operations in Syria.

The release also accused Erdogan of undermining democratic institutions, including judicial independence, a rollback of democratic rights and recent efforts to target locally employed staff at US diplomatic outposts with what the lawmakers called baseless criminal charges.

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 State of Texas Sues Google for 'Anti-Competitive Conduct' - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US state of Texas is filing a lawsuit against Google over the company's anti-competitive conduct, the Attorney General's Office said in a statement.

"Texas takes the lead once more. Today, we're filing a lawsuit against Google for anticompetitive conduct," the statement said via Twitter on Wednesday.

A copy of the lawsuit shows the attorney generals in the states of Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota and Utah also joined the lawsuit.

The lawsuit argues Google has allegedly engaged in false or deceptive business practices with in its advertising network. It also alleges that Google infringes on user's privacy by accessing their personal information for its own financial benefit.

The states want Google to pay them penalty fees for the company's alleged monopolization of the advertisement server market, the court document said, adding that they also want a court to restore competition.

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.

Twitter to Start Removing False COVID-19 Vaccine Claims From Platform - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Twitter said in a statement that it will start a new policy of removing from its platform false information and claims about the coronavirus vaccines. "Content that is demonstrably false or misleading and may lead to significant risk of harm (such as increased exposure to the virus, or adverse effects on public health systems) may not be shared on Twitter," the statement said on Tuesday.

Twitter explained the ban covers sharing content that may mislead people about the nature of the novel coronavirus, the efficacy and safety of preventive measures, treatments, or other precautions, official regulations, restrictions or exemptions pertaining to health advisories.

"In collaboration with key public health partners, we've updated our approach to misleading information to address Tweets that contain potentially harmful misleading information about COVID-19 vaccines," the statement said.

For content related to the coronavirus to be labeled or removed under this policy, it must advance a claim of fact, expressed in definitive terms, be demonstrably false or misleading, based on widely available, authoritative sources and be likely to impact public safety or cause serious harm, the statement 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.

Kenyan Indicted in Al Shabab 9/11-Type Airliner Hijack Plot - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A citizen of Kenya has been indicted in a plot to hijack an airliner and use it for a September 11-type terrorist attack against the United States on behalf of the al Qaeda-affiliated al Shabab terrorist organization, the US Department of Justice announced in a news release on Tuesday.

"The Department of Justice announced the unsealing of an indictment charging Cholo Abdi Abdullah with six counts of terrorism-related offenses arising from his activities as an operative of the foreign terrorist organization al Shabab, including conspiring to hijack aircraft in order to conduct a 9/11-style attack in the United States," the release said.

The Justice Department said Abdullah obtained pilot training and researched how to hijack aircraft in order to conduct a September 11-style attack at the direction of al Shabab.

"Today's announcement shows that foreign terrorist organizations, like al Shabab, remain determined to plot, plan, and conspire to commit terrorist acts across the globe against the United States, our interests and our foreign partners," FBI Assistant Director for Counterterrorism Jill Sanborn said in the release.

Abdullah was arrested in July of 2019 in the Philippines on local charges and was then transferred on Tuesday to the custody of US law enforcement on the charges in the indictment, the release 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 Charges Ex-Venezuela Treasurer in Bribery, Money Laundering Case - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The United States filed a superseding indictment against former Venezuelan National Treasurer Claudia Patricia Diaz Guillen and her spouse for their alleged role in bribery and money laundering, the US Department of Justice said in a statement.

"Diaz, 47, and her spouse, Adrian Jose Velasquez Figueroa, 41, Venezuelan citizens who reside in Madrid, Spain, were charged in a superseding indictment filed in the Southern District of Florida with one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering and two counts of money laundering," the statement said on Wednesday.

In August of 2018, the US government indicted a Venezuelan billionaire and owner of Globovision network Raul Gorrin Belisario for participating in a laundering scheme related to both Diaz and Velasquez, the statement also said.

"The superseding indictment alleges that Gorrin paid millions of dollars in bribes to two former Venezuelan national treasurers, Alejandro Andrade Cedeno (Andrade) and Diaz, and to Velasquez, for the benefit of Diaz, to corruptly secure the rights to conduct foreign currency exchange transactions for the Venezuelan government at favorable rates," the statement added. Andrade was previously sentenced to 10 years in prison in November 2018, and admitted receiving over \$1 billion in bribes from Gorrin and other co-conspirators, 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.

Vaccines Offer US Economy Hope, But Next 4-5 Months Pose Challenges - Fed Chairman

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The start of COVID-19 vaccinations in the United States offers hope of turning the economy around by middle of next year, yet surging infections over the next four to five months could do irreparable damage to many businesses, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said on Wednesday.

"Recent news on vaccines has been very positive. However, significant challenges and uncertainties remain with regard to the timing, production and distribution of vaccines, as well as their efficacy across different groups," Powell told a news conference after the Fed's monthly policy meeting. "The ongoing surge in new COVID-19 cases both here in the US and abroad is particularly concerning, and the next few months are likely to be very challenging."

Powell said he expected "significant numbers" of people to get vaccinated against the virus by the end of the second quarter and anticipates that the economy will be performing strongly by the second half of next year.

"But we know there are small businesses all over the country that have been basically unable to really function and they are just hanging on. They are critical to our economy. Now that we can kind of see the light at the end of the tunnel, it would be bad to see people losing their business,

their life's work in many cases or even generations worth of work because they couldn't last another few months, which is what it amounts to," he said.

US drug company Pfizer Inc has started rolling the COVID-19 vaccine developed with German partner BioNTech, with health authorities estimating that some 100 million Americans are expected to be immunized from the virus by spring. On the heels of the Pfizer vaccine is another developed by Moderna Inc, which is expected to win US government approval later this week. Despite hope offered by vaccines, the pandemic has raged anew in the United States in recent weeks, after a respite in the summer to early fall period. Infections have crossed 16 million since January, hospitalization has hit daily record highs of above 100,000 and deaths have breached 300,000.

More than 21 million Americans lost their jobs between March and April, at the height of lockdowns forced by the COVID-19. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, less than 700,000 jobs were added each month. In November, there were just 245,000 additions. The Fed announced on Wednesday it will keep at near zero US interest rates which it dropped at the start of the pandemic and buy at least \$80 billion per month of Treasury securities and \$40 billion per month of agency mortgage-backed securities in its bid to provide maximum employment and price stability goals.

Aside from the Fed initiative, lawmakers in the US Congress have been working to pass a stimulus relief of more than \$900 billion, that would include stimulus checks to needy Americans, after an earlier stimulus of about \$2.2 trillion approved in March.

"All of these government policies (are) trying to work together to create a bridge across this economic chasm that was created by the pandemic," Powell said. "For many Americans that bridge is there and they are across it. There is a group that don't have a bridge yet. It's the ten million people who lost their jobs and people who may lose their homes. You see many millions of Americans are waiting in food lines in their cars these days all over the country. We know there is a need out there."

The US economy shrank by 5 percent in the first quarter and a record 31.4 percent in the subsequent three months before rebounding by 33.1 percent in the third 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.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik)

CYBER ATTACKS AGAINST US AGENCIES

* Russia has not received any notification from the United States about the alleged hacker attacks, Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday.

* Six US Senators on Thursday requested an FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) report on alleged Russian cyberattacks against federal government entities.

NEW EU CYBER SECURITY STRATEGY

- * The European Union's new cybersecurity strategy envisages setting up a special cyberintelligence working group, EU high representative for the foreign policy, Josep Borrell, said on Wednesday.
- * The European Union should be able to activate the cybersanctions regime against malicious actors if a qualified majority adopts a relevant decision, Borrell said.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH DEVELOPMENTS

- * Reports about the "encirclement" of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh do not correspond to reality, the Russian Defense Ministry told reporters on Wednesday.
- * More than 430 people returned from Armenia to their Nagorno-Karabakh homes over the past day, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
- * Moscow believes that both Armenia and Azerbaijan are focused on establishing peace in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

US SANCTIONS AGAINST TURKEY

- * Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Wednesday that his country would boost its defense industry production in light of Washington's sanctions over the purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems, also noting that the restrictions are qualified as an attack on the national sovereignty.
- * Washington's sanctions against Turkey over the purchase of S-400 show once again that the United States is incapable of competing fairly, the spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

WORLD BANK FORECAST ON RUSSIA'S ECONOMY

- * The World Bank on Wednesday revised up forecast for Russia's GDP contraction in 2020 to 4 percent from 5 percent, expected by the organization in September, while in 2021 the country's economy is set to grow by 2.6 percent.
- * The social policy measures, introduced by the Russian government to support citizens affected by the pandemic and the COVID-19-induced economic downturn, have managed to partly offset the growth of poverty rate in 2020, the World Bank said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

- * The US government has allocated 2 million doses of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine to jurisdictions in the United States and almost 6 million doses of the Moderna coronavirus vaccine in case it receives the necessary authorization, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said.

* French Prime Minister Jean Castex announced Wednesday that his country would receive more than a million doses of the Pfizer/Biontech vaccine against coronavirus by December 30.

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.

Latest Trump Space Policy Directive Orders Development of Nuclear Power, Propulsion

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump instructed future US governments to develop nuclear power options to support human settlements on the Moon and Mars and also provide propulsion for spacecraft and rovers to explore the surfaces of other planets, according to a new Space Policy Directive released by the White House on Wednesday.

"This memorandum establishes a national strategy to ensure the development and use of SNPP [space nuclear power and propulsion] systems when appropriate to enable and achieve the scientific, exploration, national security, and commercial objectives of the United States," the document dubbed Space Policy Directive-6 said.

The directive sets a number of goals, including establishing a uranium-based nuclear power plant on the surface of the moon by 2027, and using the technology for exploring Mars. The directive also sets a 2030 goal to develop new technology to improve systems that generate electricity using radioactive isotopes. Such systems offer long-term power sources for robotic exploration of planet surfaces and robotic spacecraft to transit the solar system.

Trump has set a goal of returning US astronauts to the moon by 2024, building a permanent lunar colony next and sending humans to Mars.

While the directive focuses on developing nuclear power technology for space exploration, it also reflects an effort to maintain current US space exploration plans after Trump leaves office in January.

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 Government Executed More Inmates Than All 50 States Combined in 2020 - Study

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US federal government has carried out more executions of prisoners this year than all 50 state governments combined, the Death Penalty Research Group said in a year-end report on Wednesday.

"The ten people executed under the federal death penalty in the second half of 2020 exceeded the number executed by all of the states combined, the first time in the history of the United States in which the federal government carried out more civilian executions than did the states," the report said.

Seven states have carried out a combined total of seven executions this year, according to the latest data in the report.

Although executions in the United States are not uncommon at the state level, the US federal government had not carried out an execution for 17 years before July.

US President Donald Trump's administration in 2019 ordered the resumption of capital punishment for federal crimes.

Alfred Bourgeois, found guilty of beating his two-year-old daughter to death, was the tenth inmate to be executed by the federal government on December 11. His death came soon after the US Supreme Court had rejected Bourgeois' request to halt the execution.

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, UAE Work to Quickly Finalize Advanced Arms Deal - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are working on letters of offer and acceptance to finalize their advanced arms deal, Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs R. Clarke Cooper said on Wednesday. "The formal period on Congressional review for these sales actually just concluded on December 11," Cooper said. "We continue to work with the UAE on what's called the letters of offer and acceptance, or the LOAs, and those, if concluded, will certainly finalize any of these deals."

Cooper also said the Trump administration has cleared the congressional process regarding the advanced arms deal with the UAE.

"That is moving in a very deliberate pace as we would at any time of the year regardless of the calendar... Our intent is to have those done as soon as able," he said.

Last month, the US State and Defense departments formally notified Congress of the Trump administration's intent to authorize the UAE's proposed purchase of several advanced capabilities worth \$23.37 billion.

The purchase includes 50 F-35 fighter jets valued at \$10.4 billion, up to 18 MQ-9B Unmanned Aerial Systems and a variety of munitions.

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.

Six US Senators Request FBI, CISA Report on Alleged Russian Cyberattacks

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Six US Senators on Thursday requested an FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) report on alleged Russian cyberattacks against federal government entities.

"We are seeking all available information on the scope and details of the recently exposed vulnerability's impacts on the US federal government," Senators Jeanne Shaheen, Jerry Moran,

Roger Wicker, John Thune, Maria Cantwell and Richard Blumenthal said in a letter to the leaders of FBI and CISA.

On Sunday, US media reported that hackers backed by a foreign government had stolen data from the Treasury Department and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. The Washington Post reported that the Cozy Bear hacking group, allegedly linked to the Russian government, was likely behind the hacking but offered no evidence to back its claims.

The senators pointed out in their letter that the activities of the affected government entities play a crucial role in the daily lives of all Americans and compromising their efforts represents a "grave concern."

The senators also said that the possible implications of the cyberattacks reach far beyond the specific federal agencies' jurisdiction.

The Russian Embassy in the United States said the attempts by US media to blame Russian hackers for the recent attacks on US governmental agencies are unfounded. The Russian embassy said the alleged activities contradict the principles and practice of the country's foreign policy.

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 Regulator Votes to Free Oil, Mining Companies From Foreign Payments Disclosures

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said in a statement on Wednesday that it has voted to relax disclosure requirements on payments made by oil, gas and mining companies to foreign governments.

"The Securities and Exchange Commission today voted to adopt final rules that will require resource extraction issuers that are required to file reports (that) disclose payments made to the US federal government or foreign governments for the commercial development of oil, natural gas, or minerals," the statement said.

SEC Chair Jay Clayton said achieving this result was not a straightforward task and applauded the commission staff for their considerable efforts during unique circumstances.

US media reported that the vote closed another chapter in a decade-long attempt to enact a controversial provision of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act (CRA) designed to help stave off corruption by companies in resource extraction industries. The legislation was drafted in the aftermath of the 2008-09 Great Recession to crimp excesses in the US financial and corporate sectors that could result in another economic meltdown. The first version of the reporting rules for extraction companies adopted by the SEC in 2012 was defeated in court by the American Petroleum Institute, which argued that the rule would put companies it represents at a competitive disadvantage.

Republicans aligned to President Donald Trump hailed Wednesday's SEC vote.

US House Financial Services Committee Republican leader Patrick McHenry said in a statement that it was time to permanently repeal Dodd-Frank's costly and unnecessary mandatory disclosures, which hurt American businesses.

"The history of the resource extraction provisions proves the problem with trying to do social policy through public company disclosure requirements," McHenry said.

Anti-corruption advocates lambasted the SEC for accommodating what they say is a lack of transparency sought by US resource mining companies.

"Once the proceeds of corruption enter complex international networks of banks, law firms, shell companies, and other service providers, it becomes extraordinarily difficult for regulators, law enforcement, and financial institutions to mitigate illicit finance," Ian J. Lynch, a Vermont-based foreign policy analyst, wrote in a commentary on Wednesday.

Lynch argued that reporting only the total sums of payments that resource extraction companies make to national governments lacks the precision necessary to alert citizens to corrupt deals cut at their expense.

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 Lets Artificial Intelligence Copilot Fly in Military Aircraft For First Time

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A non-human copilot consisting of a computer programed with an artificial intelligence (AI) algorithm was allowed to share the controls of a military aircraft with a human pilot for the first time ever, the US Air Force said in a press release on Wednesday.

"The AI algorithm, known as ARTUμ, flew ... on a U-2 Dragon Lady assigned to the 9th Reconnaissance Wing at Beale Air Force Base's U-2 Federal Laboratory researchers developed ARTUμ and trained it to execute specific in-flight tasks that otherwise would be done by the pilot," the release said.

The release characterized Tuesday's test flight as a "major leap forward for national defense in the digital age," with ARTUμ in control of sensors and tactical navigation of the U-2 spy plane, the release also said.

The flight included a simulated surveillance mission with the ARTUμ copilot also responsible for locating and identifying enemy launchers, the release added.

An unnamed human pilot flew the plane, while sharing data from the U-2's radar with the non-human copilot, 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 State of Texas Sues Google for 'Anti-Competitive Conduct' - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US state of Texas is filing a lawsuit against Google over the company's anti-competitive conduct, the Attorney General's Office said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Texas takes the lead once more. Today, we're filing a lawsuit against Google for anticompetitive conduct," the statement said via Twitter.

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.

Fed Decides to Maintain Interest Rate at Zero to 0.25% Range, Buy More Assets - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve said in a statement on Wednesday that it has decided to maintain the interest rate in a zero to 0.25 percent range and will buy more assets to better support the US economy affected by the novel coronavirus. "The Committee decided to maintain the target range for the federal funds rate at 0 to 1/4 percent," the statement said. "In addition, the Federal Reserve will continue to increase its holdings of Treasury securities by at least \$80 billion per month and of agency mortgage-backed securities by at least \$40 billion per month until substantial further progress has been made toward the Committee's maximum employment and price stability goals." The Federal Reserve explained the asset purchases would help foster smooth market functioning and accommodative financial conditions, thereby supporting the flow of credit to households and businesses.

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 Indicts Al-Shabab Terrorist for Planning 9/11-Style Plane Attack - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has indicted an al-Shabab terrorist on charges of conspiring to hijack an aircraft for a September 11-style attack, the US Justice Department said in a release on Wednesday.

"The Department of Justice announced the unsealing of an indictment charging Cholo Abdi Abdullah with six counts of terrorism-related offenses arising from his activities as an operative of the foreign terrorist organization al-Shabaab, including conspiring to hijack aircraft in order to conduct a 9/11-style attack in the United States. Abdullah was arrested in July 2019 in the Philippines on local charges, and was subsequently transferred on Dec. 15, 2020," the release said.

Abdullah, a Kenyan national, is scheduled to appear before a US judge later on Wednesday in a New York City federal court, the release said.

The Justice Department said Abdullah traveled to the Philippines where he enrolled in a flight schools from 2017 to 2019, ultimately completing tests to obtain a pilot's license. While there, he also researched hijacking techniques, including methods to breach the cockpit door of a commercial aircraft, and sought to identify the tallest buildings in several US cities as well as information on how to obtain a US visa, the release said.

If convicted, Abdullah faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 20 years on charges that include providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization, conspiring to murder US nationals, conspiring to commit aircraft piracy, conspiring to destroy aircraft, and conspiring to commit acts of terrorism transcending national boundaries, according to the release.

Al Shabab, which serves as the principle arm of the al-Qaeda terrorist group (banned in Russia) in East Africa, has launched a series of terrorist strikes including a January 2019 strike on a Nairobi, Kenya hotel, which, including a US citizen who survived al-Qaeda's September 11, 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City.

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.

Coalition of 15 US States Warns Trump Admin. of Legal Requirement to Preserve Records

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A letter to White House Counsel Pat Cipollone from the attorneys general of 15 states warned President Donald Trump and his staff that they are required by law to preserve all records, including presidential tweets, New York Attorney General Letitia James said in a press release on Wednesday.

"All staff in the Executive Office of the President - which includes President Donald Trump - must comply with the law and take all necessary steps to preserve and maintain presidential records, including tweets, notes of private conversations, and emails from private servers improperly used to conduct government work," the release said.

James claimed Trump and his administration had routinely violated record-preservation laws and requested that the White House counsel to confirm presidential records laws before the January 20 inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden.

James cited a report claiming Trump had concealed details of his conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and another report critical of First Lady Ivanka Trump using a personal email account to contact government officials as examples that she claimed violated the law.

The attorneys general of Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon, Virginia, Washington and the District of Columbia co-signed the letter.

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 Says His Team Working on Plan to Get Him Publicly Vaccinated Against Coronavirus

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden said on Wednesday that his team is working on a plan to get publically vaccinated against the novel coronavirus so that the American people can witness it.

Asked when he will get the vaccine, Biden said, "We are working on that right now."

Biden said he wants to ensure his vaccination will demonstrate to the American people that the vaccine is safe.

"They are working on that plan right now. And when I do it, I'll do it publicly so you all can actually witness my getting it done," he said.

On Tuesday, Biden announced that he will publicly get vaccinated and noted that he had been advised by Dr. Anthony Fauci to do so sooner rather than later.

Pfizer is involved in a massive effort to get millions of doses of its coronavirus vaccine -jointly developed with Germany's BioNTech - out after the shots became the first immunization against the coronavirus approved by US authorities over the weekend.

Former Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton announced earlier this month their intention to get vaccinated during a live television broadcast. Following their lead, Biden said he too would take a vaccine on camera.

The Pfizer vaccine is being administered first to healthcare workers and long-term residents of nursing homes. While some 100 million Americans are expected to be immunized by spring, resistance is also anticipated from at least half of the population fearing the vaccine's safety and more than 20 potential side effects.

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 Indicts Al-Shabab Terrorist for Planning 9/11-Style Plane Attack - Justice Dept

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) – The United States has indicted an al-Shabab terrorist on charges of conspiring to hijack an aircraft for a 9/11-style attack, the Justice Department said in a release on Wednesday.

"The Department of Justice announced the unsealing of an indictment charging Cholo Abdi Abdullah with six counts of terrorism-related offenses arising from his activities as an operative of the foreign terrorist organization al Shabaab, including conspiring to hijack aircraft in order to conduct a 9/11-style attack in the United States. Abdullah was arrested in July 2019 in the Philippines on local charges, and was subsequently transferred on Dec. 15, 2020," the release said.

Abdullah, a Kenyan national, is scheduled to appear before a US judge later on Wednesday in a New York City federal court, 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 Space Agency NASA Formalizes Lunar Gateway Partnership With Canada

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Canadian astronauts will be among the first humans to visit the lunar Gateway, a proposed space station orbiting the moon as a transfer point to support a permanent lunar presence, NASA said in a press release on Wednesday.

"Under this agreement, CSA [Canadian Space Agency] will provide the Gateway's external robotics system, including a next-generation robotic arm, known as Canadarm3. CSA also will provide robotic interfaces for Gateway modules, which will enable payload installation including that of the first two scientific instruments aboard the Gateway," the release said.

The agreement also marks NASA's commitment to provide two crew opportunities for Canadian astronauts on lunar missions involving the Gateway. One astronaut would visit the Gateway and a second would participate in the first crewed test flight of the giant Space Launch System rocket being built by NASA, the release said.

NASA recently dropped the proposed lunar gateway from plans to send two Americans to the Moon's South Pole by 2024 in favor of plans to fly directly to the moon, much like the Apollo missions of the last century.

NASA officials have said the Gateway will be needed as a transfer point to support a sustainable lunar program, including a permanent human colony on the Moon.

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 Briefed NATO on Alleged Russian Anti-Satellite Missile Test - Envoy

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has briefed NATO on the alleged anti-satellite missile test performed by Russia, US Special Envoy for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Briefed NATO today on this egregious missile test, which directly contradicts Russia's so-called 'commitment' to prevent turning space into a battlefield. If such a weapon is used operationally, it would pollute space and have catastrophic global economic consequences," Billingslea said via Twitter.

Earlier on Wednesday, the United States' Space Command accused Russia of testing a missile intended to target satellites in orbit. The Space Command shared a news piece on its website saying Russia had tested a direct-ascent anti-satellite (DA-ASAT) missile.

Responding to a similar statement in April, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that the Pentagon seeks to justify its own anti-satellite missile development by directing such accusations at Moscow.

Both the US and Russia are parties to the Outer Space Treaty, along with China, India, the UK and over 100 other nations, prohibiting the militarization of space.

The treaty does not prohibit countries from developing technology to shoot down their own defunct satellites, with all of the US, Russia, China and India having demonstrated the capability to do so.

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 Imposes Iran-Related Sanctions on 1 Individual, 5 Entities - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed Iran-related sanctions on one individual and five companies in China and the United Arab Emirates over their alleged involvement in Iranian petrochemicals sales, the US Treasury Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated four entities for facilitating the export of Iranian petrochemical products by Triliance Petrochemical Co. Ltd. (Triliance), an entity designated by Treasury in January 2020," the statement said.

The sanctions target China-based Donghai International Ship Management Ltd. and Petrochem South East Ltd., as well as United Arab Emirates-based Alpha Tech Trading FZE and Petroliance Trading FZE.

In addition, the US State Department designated the Vietnam Gas and Chemicals Transportation Corporation and its Managing Director Vo Ngoc Phung, the statement said.

"Iran's petrochemical and petroleum sectors are primary sources of funding for the Iranian regime, which it uses to support its malign domestic and foreign agenda," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in the statement.

All designated entities have provided Triliance with critical services, including shipping, or engaged in financial transactions with this company, the statement read.

The United States has designated Triliance and three other petrochemical and petroleum companies in January 2020 for their transactions with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). In October 2020, OFAC imposed sanctions against the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum and NIOC for their financial support to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force.

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 Allocates 2Mln Doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 Vaccines for Next Week - Azar

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The US government has allocated 2 million doses of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine to jurisdictions in the United States and almost 6 million doses of the Moderna coronavirus vaccine in case it receives the necessary authorization, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said a press briefing on Wednesday.

"For next week, we have allocated another approximately two million doses of Pfizer's vaccine for jurisdictions to use," Azar said. "And if Moderna's vaccine is authorized by the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] in the coming days, we have allocated nearly 5.9 million doses of that product."

Earlier this week, healthcare workers have started giving initial shots of the Pfizer vaccine to volunteers after the Food and Drug Administration provided emergency use authorization. The Food and Drug Administration is expected to approve a second vaccine developed by Moderna later this week. Both vaccines, which require two doses spaced weeks apart, have proved about 95 percent effective in clinical trials, but with side effects such as headaches, fever and fatigue.

Azar said earlier this week that vaccinations should be available to every American who wants to receive one by the end of June.

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 Imposes Iran-related Sanctions on 1 Individual, 5 Entities – Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) – The United States has imposed Iran-related sanctions on one individual and five companies and China and the United Arab Emirates over their alleged involvement in Iranian petrochemicals sales, the US Treasury Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

“The US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated four entities for facilitating the export of Iranian petrochemical products by Triliance Petrochemical Co. Ltd. (Triliance), an entity designated by Treasury in January 2020,” the statement said.

The sanctions target China-based Donghai International Ship Management Limited and Petrochem South East Limited, as well as UAE-based Alpha Tech Trading FZE and Petroliance Trading FZE.

Alongside the Treasury’s sanctions, the US State Department designated the Vietnam Gas and Chemicals Transportation Corporation and its Managing Director Vo Ngoc Phung, the statement 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 Retail Sales Drop 1.1% in November Amid Increase in COVID-19 Cases - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Retail sales, the cornerstone of the consumer-driven US economy, fell 1.1 percent in November amid new restrictive measures introduced to deal with an increase of novel coronavirus cases, Commerce Department data revealed on Wednesday.

Economists surveyed by US media had projected a consensus decline of 0.3 percent in November to extend the 0.1 percent dip in October. However, the Commerce Department reported a 1.1 percent decrease instead as novel coronavirus measures led to an uncharacteristically quiet Thanksgiving holiday, including the month’s biggest “Black Friday” shopping event.

After a respite in the summer to the early fall period, coronavirus cases have increased in the United States and exceeded 16 million with coronavirus-related deaths topping 300,000. The authorities in numerous jurisdiction throughout the United States, such as in New York, have said they are considering imposing shutdowns of businesses or have moved to restrict

activities in the hope of containing the pandemic albeit with severe consequences to the economy.

The US economy itself fell 5 percent in the first quarter and a record 31.4 percent in the subsequent three months before rebounding by 33.1 percent in the third 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.

Pompeo to Quarantine After Contact With COVID-19-Infected Person – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will go into quarantine after coming into contact with a person who tested positive for COVID-19, a State Department spokesperson said in a statement on Wednesday.

“Secretary Pompeo has been identified as having come into contact with someone who tested positive for COVID. For reasons of privacy we can’t identify that individual,” the spokesperson said.

Pompeo has tested negative, but will be in quarantine and under close medical monitoring and will adhere to current health guidelines, the spokesperson 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 Calls Vietnam, Switzerland Currency Manipulators, Adds India to Watch List – Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) – The United States has branded Vietnam and Switzerland as “currency manipulators” and added India, Taiwan and Thailand to a watch list of countries suspected of manipulating foreign exchange markets, the Treasury Department said in its semiannual report to Congress on Thursday.

“The Report concluded that both Vietnam and Switzerland met all three criteria under the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015,” the Treasury said in a statement after releasing the report. “For each country, Treasury assessed, based on a range of evidence and circumstances, that at least part of its exchange rate management over the four quarters through June 2020.”

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin pledged to take steps to “eliminate the unfair trade advantages” resulting from the two countries’ actions.

In its report to Congress, the Treasury also expanded its “Monitoring List” of countries whose trading practices merit closer attention to include India, Taiwan and Thailand for the first time. Seven other countries - China, Japan, Korea, Germany, Italy, Singapore and Malaysia - remain on the Treasury’s watch list.

The Treasury also called on China “to improve transparency with respect to the management of its exchange rate, in particular regarding official foreign exchange intervention.”

In its previous report to Congress in January, the Treasury added Switzerland to its Monitoring List. The US in the same report also dropped China's designation as a currency manipulator, citing improved trade relations.

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.

Trudeau Says He Will Not Get Vaccinated in Order of Priority

TORONTO, December 16 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday that he will not receive the coronavirus vaccine in order of priority.

"When there's a time for healthy people in their forties to get their vaccine - when it's our turn - I will be as close to the front of that line as I can get," Trudeau said in an interview with a federal television morning show.

Trudeau also said he is "super enthusiastic" about being immunized against the novel coronavirus.

On Monday, vaccination against the novel coronavirus started in Canada with a personal support worker receiving the first shot. The federal government, acting on advice of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI), has determined that vaccination will proceed on a priority basis, with the elderly and healthcare workers slated to receive the vaccine first.

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.

Canada's Quebec Closing Non-Essential Retail Businesses December 25 to January 11-
Premier

TORONTO, December 16 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Quebec will require the so-called "non-essential" businesses to close from December 25 through January 11 due a surge in new novel coronavirus cases, Premier Minister Francois Legault said in a news conference.

"Regarding non-essential retail businesses, they'll have to close from December 25 to January 11," Legault said on Tuesday.

Legault explained that grocery stores, pharmacies, hardware stores, pet shops, including all Walmart and Costco stores, will remain open but will not be allowed to sell non-essential products.

In addition, Legault said office workers will be required to work from home from December 17 to January 11 except for jobs where attendance is necessary.

Secondary and primary schools will also close from December 17 to January 11, Legault added.