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House GOP Leader Pushes for Swalwell to Be Removed From Intel Committee After Alleged Spy Contact

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US Rep. Eric Swalwell (D-CA) has been among the strongest voices accusing Trump administration figures of meeting with alleged Russian spies who were never accused of espionage. Now he finds himself hoist by his own petard, at risk of losing a coveted committee seat over much more serious accusations.

After a closed-door briefing from FBI officials on Friday, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) has urged that Swalwell be removed from the House Intelligence Committee. The Democratic legislator is accused of having befriended an alleged Chinese spy, prompting fears he may have leaked important information to her.

"He should not be on Intel," McCarthy told reporters at the US Capitol after the briefing. "I just think there are definitely 200 other Democrats that I know could fill that place."

McCarthy's statement follows [urging by more than a dozen Republican lawmakers](#) to have Swalwell removed from the committee, which receives regular reports on classified information. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) was also present for the briefing but made no comments [to reporters afterward, Fox News noted](#). She has previously defended Swalwell and his continued presence on the Intelligence Committee.

Swalwell became embroiled in the scandal [after it emerged last week that he had been among](#) those an alleged Chinese spy named Fang Fang pursued relationships with between 2011 and 2015. Swalwell says he cut off contact as soon as he became aware she was being investigated by the FBI.

Swalwell joined the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in 2015, after he was elected to a second term. It's unclear if his time on the committee and his relationship with Fang overlapped at all.

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US Sanctions Maker of Biometric Authentication System Used in Venezuela's Parliamentary Elections

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Trump administration has alleged without evidence that the December 6 National Assembly elections in Venezuela were fraudulent, even though it declined to send election observers.

On Friday, [the US Department of State announced new sanctions](#) against Ex-Cle Soluciones Biometricas CA, an Argentine-owned company that provided the biometric identity verification machines used in Venezuela's December 6 elections for the National Assembly. The sanctions, which also target two company representatives, authorize the seizure of their assets in the United States.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [claimed Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro used Ex-Cle CA](#) and China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC) "to rig the electoral processes," which Pompeo said "should leave no doubt that the December 6 legislative elections were fraudulent and do not reflect the will of the Venezuelan people." Venezuelan President Nicolas [Maduro told AFP that Pompeo had imposed](#) "stupid sanctions like the idiot that he is, as he is on his way out, against the company and the businessmen who manufactured the machines so that the people of Venezuela could vote."

The Venezuelan government signed its contract with Ex-Cle CA [to provide biometric authentication of voters' identities](#) in 2017, after previous provider Smartmatic canceled its contract.

In the December 6 elections, [Venezuelans voted for 277 deputies to represent them](#), with more than 100 political parties running candidates. While one faction of the opposition boycotted the election, which the US and other countries used to declare the election illegitimate, other, larger opposition parties participated. Maduro's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) [won overwhelmingly, scoring 67% of the vote](#) and 189 seats in the National Assembly, ending the opposition's five-year control over the legislature.

Thanks to an arson attack earlier this year that destroyed nearly all of its older voting machines, Venezuela's National Electoral Council secured new state-of-the-art electronic machines and used a simplified identity verification system to ensure Venezuelans could only vote once.

The elections were audited not only by the council but by [hundreds of election observers invited from dozens](#) of countries.

In its effort to totally strangle Venezuelan society, the US has levied sanctions on both nations and firms that continue to do business with the South American nation. The US claims Maduro's 2018 election was illegitimate and since January 2019 has recognized Juan Guaido, a previously-unknown former Venezuelan lawmaker from a tiny opposition party, as the country's interim president.

In August, the US seized four Iranian-flagged cargo vessels bound for Venezuela and the 1.1 million gallons of fuel they were transporting that Caracas had already paid for. [In October, the US sold that oil for \\$40 million](#). The US has also seized the assets of Venezuela's petroleum company Citgo in the United States as well as Venezuela's diplomatic offices, and the UK has [blocked Caracas from retrieving \\$1 billion in gold](#) stored in the Bank of England's vaults.

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Emirati Influence Hangs Over Israel's Normalization Wave - Could Mauritania Be Next?
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Last week, Morocco became the seventh Arab state to normalize relations with Israel and the fifth in as many months. With the US brokering so many deals, it raises the question of which nation will be next. Regional experts told Sputnik there is good reason to believe the Islamic Republic of Mauritania will soon bury the hatchet with Jerusalem.

In 1967 in Khartoum, Sudan, the members of the Arab League met in the wake of the devastating Six-Day War and pledged to uphold “three nos” with regard to Israel: no peace, no recognition and no negotiations. However, just 11 years later, Egypt became the first Arab nation to break the pact, signing a peace treaty with Israel at Camp David, Maryland, in 1978, brokered by US President Jimmy Carter. Then, in 1994, Jordan did the same, with the ceremony being presided over by US President Bill Clinton.

Then, in the final months of 2020, five more Arab nations normalized relations: the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco - with the deals being negotiated by associates of US President Donald Trump. However, as Sputnik has reported, many of these nations have long had underground relations with Israel for fear of publicly breaking the “three nos” and siding against the Palestinians.

Is Mauritania Next?

Perhaps the first reason to believe a deal could be in the works is that the US has brokered a peace deal between Mauritania and Israel before. In 1999, then-US Secretary of State [Madeleine Albright hailed the Sahelian country as](#) a “force for regional reconciliation and peace.” However, just 10 years later, Nouakchott suspended them in the wake of [Operation Cast Lead, Israel's brutal war on Gaza](#) in December 2008 and January 2009 that killed as many as 1,400 Palestinians.

Tiberio Graziani, head of the Italy-based Vision and Global Trends International Institute for Global Analyses, told Sputnik that “geostrategically such an agreement will implement Israel's penetration of North West Africa.”

“The agreement should also strengthen Mauritania's current leadership, which will, however, also have to take into account the internal opposition. It should be emphasized that - on a global level - the penetration of Israeli influence in Africa is supported by the US in an anti-Chinese function, and perhaps, in perspective, also in an anti-Turkish one.”

. In a nationally broadcast statement, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the “full and official peace” with the UAE would lead to cooperation in many spheres between the countries and a “wonderful future” for citizens of both countries.

That internal opposition would come strongest from Tewassoul, a Muslim Brotherhood-aligned party in opposition to the government of Mauritanian President Mohammed Ould Ghazouani that holds 14 seats in the country's legislature. Ghazouani's Union for the Republic party [has moved in recent years to marginalize the group](#), which is also considered a terrorist organization by the UAE and several other countries, including Russia.

“The role of the United Arab Emirates will be decisive. UAE will support the leadership of Mauritania in signing a potential agreement with Israel. In practice, the UAE are the forerunners of Israel's foreign policy dedicated to creating a network of non-hostile countries in the Middle East and Africa and to weakening the Arab League. At the moment the Mauritanian opposition appears to be mainly focused on domestic politics and focused on undermining the current leadership.”

Dr. Michael Barak, a senior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies and the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), echoed Graziani's points and noted the pivotal role the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) played in brokering the peace deals between Israel and other Sunni states, including the initial UAE peace deal in September.

"It was KSA which approved the UAE and Bahrain's stance to normalize ties; it was KSA who played a role in the peace between Morocco [and] Israel; It has been playing a role as well to push Pakistan to form full diplomatic ties with Israel. So it's inevitable that KSA is [brokering a] Mauritania-Israel deal. Moreover, KSA and Mauritania enjoy very good ties, so the Mauritania regime is more attentive to the KSA's regime."

He further noted that such a move would play into the Trump administration's hands by helping to expand the growing Sunni-Israel bloc against Iran, making it likely Washington could sweeten the deal with financial investments for the West African country.

However, Amatzia Baram, professor emeritus at the Department of the History of the Middle East at the University of Haifa, dismissed the idea, noting instead that Oman and Saudi Arabia are more "natural candidates" for a peace deal due to their extensive informal ties with Israel, but also face "serious constraints" politically on making that relationship public.

Investments Give UAE Leverage in Africa

Across Africa, the UAE has been leveraging its financial and political clout to push Muslim countries closer to Israel since even before the UAE and Israel made public their friendly relationship.

Last year, Abu Dhabi successfully pressured Chad into reversing its long-standing opposition to Israel, too. N'Djamena severed relations with Tel Aviv in 1972 under pressure from Libyan revolutionary leader Muammar Gaddafi, [but revived them in January 2019](#).

In 2017, [the UAE promised \\$150 million for Chad's National Development Plan](#), a \$9 billion project to diversify the country's economy away from oil exports, with petroleum and other mineral fuels [accounting for 94% of its exports in 2019](#).

Earlier this year, [the UAE pledged \\$2 billion in investments to Mauritania](#)- an amount equal to 38% of Mauritania's gross domestic product. In September, Jalel Harchaoui of the [Clingendael Institute told Turkish Radio and Television](#) that such an investment "creates a level of sway, aura and leverage on the part of Abu Dhabi that is hard to fathom."

Indeed, when news broke in August 2020 of the UAE's forthcoming peace deal with Israel, [Nouakchott praised the "wisdom and good judgment"](#) of the Emirati leadership, rather than condemning the move, as did some other Arab League members, [such as Algerian President Abdelmadjid Teboune](#).

Chad and Mauritania are part of a larger plan of Emirati investment that spans across the Sahel region and includes Sudan, which exerted a controlling influence on the government of former Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir, who joined the Saudi-Emirati war in Yemen by [sending thousands of Janjaweed militia fighters](#) to fight the Zaidi Shiite Houthi movement. Morocco for a time also joined that alliance, sending a squadron of F-16 fighters to the region.

It's little surprise that Abu Dhabi has also [put tens of billions of dollars into Sudan both before and after Bashir's 2019 overthrow](#), [including a \\$225 million investment in agricultural improvements](#) in October, announced days before Khartoum announced its own peace deal with Israel.

In Morocco as well, the UAE has played an important role, [investing billions in Morocco's tourism sector](#), and Moroccan workers in the UAE are [one of the country's largest sources of remittance payments](#).

Just days before Trump announced the deal between Morocco and Israel - which [the US might still sweeten with its own \\$3 billion](#) investment - UAE Ambassador to Morocco Al Asri Aldhaferi praised his country's ["exemplary and fulfilling relations" with Rabat](#). A month earlier, Abu Dhabi opened a consulate in Laayoune, the capital of Western Sahara, and was among the first nations to condemn the Saharawi protests in Guerguerat against the completion of a road into Mauritania that would allow easier exporting of goods.

No True Peace Without Palestinians

However, James Gelvin, a professor of history at University of California, Los Angeles, and an expert on the social, cultural and political history of the modern Middle East, pointed out to Sputnik that the Trump administration tends to hold its cards very close to its chest on these issues, but he dismissed the notion that such deals would lead to more peace in the region. "At its root, the conflict is not between Israel and Mauritania or Israel and Morocco. It is about Israel and the Palestinians," Gelvin said. "The Trump administration has been cynically turning the flank on the Palestinians for political gain. But there will be no peace in that part of the Middle East until there is a just resolution of the Palestinian issue."

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Photos: Western Sahara's Polisario Front Continues to Fight Morocco After Trump Recognition Deal

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After a 29-year truce, war has broken out again in Western Sahara, pitting the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces, which claim the territory as part of Morocco, against the Saharawi Army, the militant resistance force seeking to establish an independent republic for the Saharawi people. With the Moroccan forces equipped by the Americans and French, and the Saharawis using mostly Soviet and Russian weapons, the match-up in the desert wastes seems a step out of time.

The indigenous Saharawi Army fields an eclectic mix of Soviet Cold War-era hardware donated to them by the Algerians, as well as whatever American and French equipment they can capture from the Moroccans.

The Saharawis also have an array of technicals - pickup trucks converted into mobile weapons platforms by installing machine guns or anti-aircraft cannons on the back, which are common on the isolated battlefields of sub-Saharan Africa.

In October, Saharawi demonstrators [began a sit-in protest at the southern border town of Guerguerat](#), a neutral zone on the coast where Morocco has built a road into Mauritania. The protesters aimed to block Moroccan export of goods extracted from Western Sahara, which the United Nations has ruled is against international law, as well as to put pressure on the UN to

begin monitoring human rights in Western Sahara [and to hold its long-promised independence referendum](#).

Then, on November 13, the Moroccan military dispersed the occupation protest with force, violating the 1991 peace agreement and [prompting the Polisario Front to declare the war](#) was back on.

Attacking the Wall

The Moroccan construction of a massive sand wall dividing Western Sahara in two in the 1980s has changed the tactics of Saharawi forces, forcing them to adopt a less mobile style of assault that often focuses on artillery bombardments and sniper attacks.

Saharawi Army artillery strikes Moroccan positions behind the sand wall in Western Sahara While Saharawi forces have staged attacks all along the sand wall, most operations have been concentrated against the northeastern end of the barrier against the Mahbas, Farsia, Howza and Amgala sectors.

The 1,700-mile long Sand Wall built by Morocco, dividing Western Sahara

These are among the oldest of the berms, which encompass the capital of Laayoune and the massive phosphate mine at Bou Craa, which together form the core reasons behind Morocco's occupation of the territory.

Moroccan Army

However, the sand wall isn't the only barrier: more than 7 million landmines are also buried along the berm. In forts along and behind the berm also sit most of Morocco's 175,000-strong army.

The Royal Moroccan Armed Forces receive extensive aid from the United States, which gives Rabat money to buy US military equipment via the Foreign Military Sales program. Last year, Morocco requested [more equipment from the US than any other nation](#): \$7.26 billion worth, including 25 F-16V "Viper" fighter jets, smart bomb kits and TOW wire-guided missiles.

This past October, [Washington and Rabat signed a 10-year defense cooperation](#) agreement, and in the wake of the peace deal with Israel, the Trump administration [pushed ahead with \\$1 billion in new weapons for Morocco](#), including four MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones, which are modified versions of the Reaper drone, as well as Hellfire missiles and Paveway and JDAM laser-guided bombs.

The Moroccan military also uses an array of French-made equipment, including Mirage F-1 fighter aircraft and AMX-10 reconnaissance vehicles. They also operate the Ratel Infantry Fighting Vehicle, purchased from apartheid-era South Africa.

A Decades-Long Conflict

Since 1973, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario Front) has fought for self-determination for the Saharawi people. First, they fought against the Spanish colonial forces, but then in 1975, when the Spanish left and Mauritania and Morocco split the territory in two, Polisario took up arms against them as well.

Four years later, Nouakchott signed a peace treaty recognizing the newly declared Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and withdrawing from the southern half of Western Sahara. But Morocco held fast, and for the next 12 years faced off against Polisario. Rabat progressively cordoned off the urban areas and resource-rich parts of the country with sand walls, forcing the Saharawis eastward into the desert, but failed to defeat Polisario in battle.

More than 100,000 Saharawis fled the country, seeking refuge in camps across the Algerian border, where they have remained.

In 1991, a peace agreement also saw the United Nations agree to coordinate a future referendum on independence in Western Sahara - an agreement its mission there, MINURSO, has not lived up to, which prompted the October protest.

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Photos: Pelosi, McConnell Receive Pfizer's COVID-19 Vaccine
by [Mary F.](#)

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on December 11 issued the first emergency use authorization for a COVID-19 vaccine to a drug produced by Pfizer and BioNTech. US health care workers began receiving the vaccine this week.

In addition to US health workers, senior US government officials have begun receiving Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine, with Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) receiving their first doses of the vaccine on Friday.

According to a [report by The Hill](#), Pelosi received the vaccine at noon on Friday. The shot was personally administered by the Capitol's attending physician, Brian Monahan.

"Today, with confidence in science & at the direction of the Office of the Attending Physician, I received the COVID-19 vaccine. As the vaccine is being distributed, we must all continue mask-wearing, social distancing & other science-based steps to save lives & crush the virus," Pelosi tweeted Friday, along with photos of Monahan giving her the shot.

McConnell also received a vaccine shot on Friday.

"Just received the safe, effective COVID vaccine following continuity-of-government protocols. Vaccines are how we beat this virus," tweeted McConnell, a survivor of childhood polio. "Now back to continue fighting for a rescue package including a lot more money for distribution so more Americans can receive it as fast as possible."

Other senior US government officials have also started to receive the vaccine, including Vice President Mike Pence, his wife Karen and Surgeon General Jerome Adams, who all received the shot on [live television Friday morning](#). President-elect Joe Biden is expected to be vaccinated on Monday, [The Hill reported](#).

According to data from [GovTrack](#), at least 102 members of Congress have either quarantined, tested positive for COVID-19 or been exposed to someone who has the illness. In addition to being considered essential workers, federal lawmakers face a high risk of virus exposure due to frequent travel and interactions with others.

Congressional leaders are currently in the process of negotiating a new COVID-19 aid package that is anticipated to be worth around \$900 billion. It is expected to include a \$300 federal unemployment bonus, another round of direct payments to Americans, small business funding and money for COVID-19 vaccine distribution, [NBC News reported](#).

However, the negotiations stalled Friday after Democrats protested efforts by Republicans led by Sen. Pat Toomey (R-PA) to include a provision to the bill that Democrats believe will make it more difficult for the incoming Biden administration to access emergency powers for additional lending authority.

On Thursday, an [FDA advisory panel recommended](#) granting Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine an emergency use authorization. If approved by the FDA, the vaccine could be distributed in the US [as early as next week](#).

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United Airlines to Return Beleaguered Boeing 737 MAX to Service in February
by [Mary F.](#)

The Boeing 737 MAX 8 was grounded worldwide in March 2019 after 346 people died in two crashes: Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302. The crashes were attributed to the plane's Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS), which failed on both fatal flights.

United Airlines on Friday announced that it plans to return the Boeing 737 MAX 8 to its schedule starting February 11, 2021. According to the Chicago-based carrier, the plane will fly from its Denver, Colorado; and Houston, Texas, hubs. However, due to consumer concerns about the aircraft's safety, the carrier will also deploy other types of aircraft on similar routes as its MAX jets so that concerned consumers will have the option to fly on different planes, [Flight Global reported](#).

"Nothing is more important to United than the safety of our customers and employees, so United's MAX fleet won't return to service until we have completed more than 1,000 hours of work on every aircraft, including FAA-mandated changes to the flight software, additional pilot training, multiple test flights and meticulous technical analysis to ensure the planes are ready to fly," the airline said in a statement, referring to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the US body responsible for regulating all aspects of civil aviation.

"We will be fully transparent with our customers and will communicate in advance when they are booked to fly on a MAX aircraft," the airline noted, adding that it will release the schedule of MAX flights and routes in early January.

In addition to United Airlines, other carriers are also planning on flying the Boeing 737 MAX 8 in the near future.

While American Airlines is [reestablishing its route network for the plane](#) in January, other companies such as Southwest Airlines and Alaska Airlines are also [planning to resume](#) flying the aircraft in 2021.

This week, [Reuters reported](#) that Boeing is hiring its own team of up to 160 pilots to collaborate with airlines on the relaunch of the 737 MAX 8. The pilots will act as cockpit observers or instructors to ensure that the aircraft makes a smooth comeback.

"Duties include: consulting activities and assist[ing] in customer support, including flying opportunities," reads a job description for one such role, according to Reuters.

US Senate investigators also concluded this week there were troubling "lapses in aviation safety oversight" by FAA regulators involved in approving the use of the Boeing 737 MAX 8.

"Our findings are troubling," Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS), chair of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, said in a [statement Friday](#). "The report details a number of significant examples of lapses in aviation safety oversight and failed leadership in the FAA."

Last month, FAA Administrator Steve Dickson signed an official rescission of the agency's Emergency Order of Prohibition on the plane, which means that operators of the Boeing 737 MAX 8 can now begin flying the aircraft in the US again.

In a November 18 [interview on CNBC](#), Dickson revealed that he is finally confident in the jet's safety.

"I'm 100% confident this is the most scrutinized commercial airplane in history, and it's ready to go ... There's a lot of work the airlines and the FAA and Boeing will have to do in the coming weeks and months," he noted.

The US government, as well as those of a number of other countries, issued an emergency order in 2019 to ground all Boeing 737 MAX 8 and 737 MAX 9 series aircraft following the deadly crash of Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 on March 10, 2019, which killed all 157 people aboard. This came in the wake of the October 2018 crash in Indonesia of Lion Air Flight 610, which left all 189 people aboard dead.

The aircraft's new flight control system, the MCAS, was found to be the cause behind both deadly accidents. Designed to be a safety feature, the system is supposed to evaluate sensor data and push the plane's nose down to keep it from stalling in the event that the nose is too high.

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Sweden to Allow New Underwater Investigation Into Estonia Ferry Wreck Site
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The MS Estonia sank in the Baltic Sea off Finland on September 28, 1994, after the ship's bow door locks failed during a storm, prompting the vessel to capsize within moments as hundreds of its passengers were left trapped. The disaster is considered Europe's second-deadliest peacetime sinking after that of the RMS Titanic.

Officials in Sweden announced their intentions on Friday to allow for a new investigation into the sinking of the MS Estonia after new evidence emerged from a documentary more than 25 years after the disastrous incident.

Sweden's Home Affairs Minister Mikael Damberg [revealed during a news conference](#) that the country's Accident Investigation Authority, along with counterparts from Finland and Estonia, would be sending divers down to the wreck site to further investigate claims made about damage to the vessel's hull.

“If there is new information, we need to look into it and clear up any questions,” Damberg said. However, it’s worth noting that no set date was given for when the mentioned dives would be taking place.

The documentary at the center of renewed interest in the wreck came from the Discovery Channel network, and it was released in September to coincide with the wreck’s 26th anniversary. The five-part broadcast provided new underwater footage that showed a previously unrecorded 13-foot gaping hole in the ship’s hull.

After the documentary was aired, [Sweden, Finland and Estonia announced](#) that a joint investigation to assess the new finding would be undertaken. An official report in 1997 ultimately concluded that the sinking was caused by a faulty door lock on the vessel’s bow.

John Ahlberk, head of the Swedish Accident Investigation Authority, stressed during the Friday conference that “the purpose [of the new investigation] is to find out what the hole is.” He also stated that preliminary reviews of the footage have not suggested that the official report on the incident was incorrect.

Incidentally, the announcement comes some two months after the Estonian government [released a report](#) based on its own investigation that determined the hole was far too small to have caused the ship to sink. At the time, the report noted that the newly discovered evidence did “not seem reasonable” enough to prompt further analysis.

Varying explanations as to why the ship sank have circulated for years, some of which suggest the MS Estonia met its end after the vessel either collided with a submarine or that an explosion occurred within the ship.

Kent Harstedt, a Swedish politician and survivor of the 1994 wreck, previously stated that theories surrounding a possible hole were dismissed by officials ahead of the release of the 1997 report, and in September raised questions about the decision to not include the information in the final report.

The MS Estonia had left Tallinn, Estonia, and was en route to Stockholm, Sweden, when it met with stormy weather conditions in the fall of 1994. The 1997 report notes that the vessel encountered strong winds and waves that measured about 13 feet in height.

A total of 852 people died when the ship sank just 22 nautical miles from Finland’s Uto island. Hundreds drowned after becoming trapped inside the capsized vessel, and dozens of others who managed to escape died of hypothermia before rescue crews arrived at the scene. Only 137 people survived.

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US Prosecutors Say ‘Flight Risk’ Ghislaine Maxwell Deserves No Bail, Should Remain in Custody

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Ghislaine Maxwell, a former associate of convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, has been accused of playing a pivotal role in the American financier’s exploitation and abuse of young

girls. The so-called “madam” has been in the custody of US law enforcement since she was apprehended in July at a New Hampshire home.

US prosecutors [noted in a Friday legal filing](#) to the US District Court of Manhattan that due to the severity of Maxwell’s alleged crimes, she should by no means be allowed to leave the confines of the Brooklyn Metropolitan Detention Center in New York after the detainee filed a second bail request.

In the filing, prosecutors also noted that the charges against the British socialite are “incredibly serious,” and that as the evidence continues to stack up against her, there are no conditions that can ensure she would not flee if released from the Brooklyn center.

“The offense conduct outlined in the indictment remains incredibly serious, the evidence against the defendant remains strong, and the defendant continues to have extensive financial resources and foreign ties, as well as the demonstrated ability to live in hiding for the long term,” reads the filing.

“The defendant poses an extreme flight risk, no condition or combination of conditions can reasonably ensure her appearance in this District, and the Court should not alter its prior finding to that effect.”

The latest filing in the case comes after Maxwell, who has remained adamant that she has not committed any crimes or been involved in criminal activity linked to Epstein, submitted a [new bail request](#) that offered \$28.5 million in exchange for her release.

Maxwell’s bail request stated that she was being kept under “oppressive conditions” that “jeopardize her physical health and psychological wellbeing.” Additionally, the detainee proposed being monitored with an electronic device and having armed guards stationed at her New York City residence.

Prosecutors further challenged the request by outlining that neither an electronic device nor guards would be sufficient, as Maxwell has the capacity to evade detection easily due to foreign connections and her extensive wealth.

As for the “oppressive conditions” that Maxwell has alleged, officials explained that she is being allowed out of her isolation cell for a period of 13 hours every day, and that she has a personal shower, access to two computers and her own phone and TV.

“Those conditions set her far apart from general population inmates, not to mention other inmates in protective custody,” the filing reads, before highlighting that Maxwell is checked on daily by psychology and medical staff.

Addressing Maxwell’s claims that ties to her unidentified husband would keep her from skipping out on the legal proceedings, prosecutors noted that the argument was “plainly inconsistent,” since she had previously stated that she was in the process of getting divorced.

“On this point, it bears noting that the defendant’s motion asks that she be permitted to live with [redacted] if granted bail, not her spouse,” prosecutors wrote. “Moreover, the fact that the defendant’s spouse has only now come forward to support the defendant should be afforded little weight given that he refused to come forward at the time of her arrest.”

Prosecutors have labeled the latest request a “repackaging” of Maxwell’s previously presented arguments made in a July bail request that proposed \$5 million for her temporary release. The July offer was [denied by Judge Alison Nathan](#) who acknowledged that the defendant poses too much of a flight risk to be released from custody. Nathan will also decide whether to approve or deny the latest bail submission.

Maxwell [has been charged](#) with multiple criminal counts, including enticing a minor to travel to engage in criminal sexual activity and knowingly transporting a minor with the intent to engage in sex, among other offenses. Maxwell's trial is slated to start in 2021. If convicted, the 58-year-old detainee faces up to 35 years in prison.

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'Step to the Plate': Fauci Urges Americans to Get COVID-19 Vaccine as Moderna Rollout May Start Soon

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The US currently only has one approved COVID-19 vaccine after the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) green-lit the Pfizer-BioNTech drug last week. Reports have suggested that a vaccine made by pharmaceutical company Moderna may soon be approved and doses deployed to health professionals.

Top health expert Anthony Fauci, who serves as the director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and as a member of the White House coronavirus task force, has called on Americans to "step to the plate" and get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Fauci's [Friday remarks](#) were given after a morning event that saw US Vice President Mike Pence, second lady Karen Pence and US Surgeon General Jerome Adams [publicly be given their first dose](#) of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine. The trio are expected to receive their second dose in approximately 21 days.

Fauci called the vaccination an "important, symbolic" move for the nation to drive the message home that "the time is now to step to the plate and when your time comes, to get vaccinated." "We all hope - and I think this is doable - that by the time we get several months into this year, we will have enough people protected that we can start thinking seriously about the return to normality," he added.

The health official also said that while the vaccine was developed quickly, the safety and integrity of the immunization was by no means compromised, as the vaccine was reviewed by an independent body before being approved by the FDA.

"The decision as to whether or not it's safe and effective was not in the hands of the company, nor was it in the hands of the administration," he stressed in a bid to reassure skeptical Americans concerned about the effectiveness of the vaccine.

Fauci later stated that pandemic may soon begin to let up somewhat "as we get into January, February, March and April."

"It's up to all of us to step up and get vaccinated," he concluded.

Moderna Rollout May Start 'Early Next Week'

The health expert also remarked [during an interview on Friday](#) with NBC's "Today" morning news show that he predicts Moderna's two-part vaccine will start being administered "by the very early part of next week."

"I would hope Monday or Tuesday, but we just have to wait to see for the final decision," he told the show's Savannah Guthrie, before underscoring that Americans still need to stay in line with COVID-19 countermeasures.

"We can't just say, 'Well, there's a vaccine on the horizon, so let's forget about everything else.'" An advisory panel [endorsed Moderna's vaccine on Thursday](#); however, the FDA has yet to grant an emergency use authorization.

The [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) urges individuals to maintain social distancing, practice good hygiene and adhere to masking protocols, among other measures. [The latest details from Johns Hopkins University](#) show that the US reported 233,271 new COVID-19 cases as of Friday, as well as an additional 3,270 related deaths. Maintaining a test positivity ratio of over 11%, the US states reporting the highest numbers of cases are, in order, California, Texas, Florida, Ohio and New York.

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Trump Signs Two-Day Gov't Funding Bill Averting Shutdown
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In order to officially pass the two-day, stopgap spending measure, US President Donald Trump is required to sign off on the bill to avoid a government shutdown.

US President Donald Trump on Friday signed a two-day government funding bill to avert a potential shutdown amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier, [the measure was approved by the US Senate](#), and passed in the US House of Representatives with a vote of 320 to 60.

The continuing resolution will extend government funding through Sunday in order to allow negotiations over a full-year spending measure and a COVID-19 relief bill to continue. After Trump signed the bill, however, congressional lawmakers will still find themselves on a tight deadline over the weekend. The House isn't expected to meet again until Sunday at 12 p.m., and the Senate is scheduled to return at 11 a.m. on Saturday.

Prior to the vote, US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) had [indicated](#) that he was "even more optimistic now than I was [Thursday]" about seeing the temporary funding bill passed before the deadline was reached.

Sens. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Josh Hawley (R-MO) were largely seen as two officials to hold up the bill as they called for leadership to include \$1,200 direct payments in the COVID-19 relief package officials are still negotiating. However, neither of the pair followed through, with [Sanders withdrawing his objection entirely](#) after giving a speech on stimulus payments.

"Majority Leader McConnell and I do not agree on much, but as I understand it we are in agreement on at least one point, and that is that the Senate cannot go home until a COVID emergency relief bill is passed," Sanders said late Friday.

Congressional leaders had indicated earlier in the week that they were closing in on an agreement after spending months not seeing eye-to-eye on relief options. House Majority

Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) told reporters Friday that there was "still some significant issues outstanding" in the way of the \$900 billion COVID-19 relief package.

The hefty relief package is tied to the \$1.4 trillion full-year spending bill that officials are trying to find common ground on.

The passage of the continuing resolution comes nearly two years after the US government found itself turning off the lights over [disputes with Trump regarding the \\$5.7 billion requested funding for the construction of the steel-and-concrete reinforced wall along the US-Mexico border](#).

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Pandemic-Related Stresses Prompting US Essential Workers to Buy Guns - Study
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted scores of Americans to start stockpiling firearms, especially after some US states began imposing mandatory lockdowns to curb the respiratory disease's spread. Officials reported in November that 17.2 million background checks had been completed thus far in 2020, 1.5 million more than the previous high set in 2016.

A [recent Rutgers University study](#) has revealed that some Americans have become so stressed by the ongoing pandemic that it has driven them to either purchase a gun or begin weighing the idea of buying one in order to gain a sense of safety.

The study, which surveyed approximately 3,500 Americans, found that 516 of its respondents were planning a new firearm purchase, and another 596 stated that were still undecided on whether they would go ahead with a potential buy in the next 12 months.

Of the individuals who stated they were going to pick up a new piece, 26.4% indicated that they had already bought a firearm in 2020. Only 3.6% of the undecided individuals had done the same. Researchers also found that people planning firearm purchases already owned more handguns, shotguns and rifles than any other group, and they were more likely to have experienced suicidal ideation in the past year.

Interestingly, study officials determined that individuals who were planning to buy a firearm were more likely to have either worked in the law enforcement field or have been considered an essential worker during the pandemic.

"Essential workers are serving on the front lines of the pandemic and many are already facing systemic inequities that leave them experiencing chronic stress," lead study author Michael Anestis [said in a university release](#). "The pandemic may be making that worse and leaving them considering options such as firearms in hopes that they will grant a sense of safety."

"Law enforcement officers already own firearms at a high rate and, in addition to COVID stress, may be experiencing concerns about their place in society as the racial justice movement has shifted public opinion about police," he added. "The thought of purchasing a firearm in the coming year may bring a sense of normalcy."

Additionally, the study highlights that while the would-be gun buyers described themselves as being uneasy or apprehensive during the pandemic, the individuals were not living in more dangerous communities than other respondents.

Anestis explained in the release that “the issue here is not that their lives are marked by a spike in violence, but rather that their fears are driving their perception of the world to come.”

The study will be published in the January 2021 edition of the Journal of Psychiatric Research. Earlier this year, [CBS News reported](#) that the National Shooting Sports Foundation had determined that 17.2 million background checks had been completed by November of this year, and that purchases had increased every month since the World Health Organization declared the pandemic in March. Sales are expected to jump even further in December, as firearms are considered hot-ticket items during the holiday season.

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Pence's Holiday: Vice President Scheduled to Leave Country After Jan. 6 Vote - Report by [Evan Craighead](#)

As the president of the Senate, US Vice President Mike Pence will preside over a January 6 congressional joint session, where bipartisan representatives from both legislative chambers will perform an official, out-loud count of the Electoral College votes from the presidential election. Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in the US, Pence is scheduled to travel overseas to the countries of Bahrain, Israel and Poland shortly after the conclusion of the January 6 session, which will presumably see Congress formally confirm US President-elect Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election, according to a government document [viewed by Politico](#) this week.

The referenced document notes that additional stops could be added to Pence's trip.

This will be Pence's first overseas trip during the pandemic, as he last traveled out of the country [back in January](#), when he visited Rome, Italy; and Jerusalem, Israel.

“I suspect the timing is anything but coincidental,” a so-called Pence ally said, as reported by Politico.

The planned trip allows Pence to leave the country and avoid any in-person fallout from those who could possibly be angered by the January 6 congressional joint session.

While Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) [has reportedly urged fellow GOP lawmakers](#) to respect the outcome of the Electoral College vote, Rep. Mo Brooks (R-AL) and Sen.-elect Tommy Tuberville (R-AL) could be GOP outliers.

Biden got 306 Electoral College votes, well above the 270 margin needed to secure a victory over US President Donald Trump.

"It is impossible what happened," Tuberville told a crowd in Georgia on Thursday. "We're gonna get that all corrected. I'm gonna tell you - don't give up on [Trump]."

“In my judgment, if only lawful votes by eligible American citizens were cast, Donald Trump won the Electoral College by a significant margin, and Congress’s certification should reflect that,” Brooks, a five-term congressman, [expressed to Politico](#) earlier this month.

The lawmaker's argument lends support to Trump's ongoing allegations of widespread voter fraud.

The sitting president, who believes the election was stolen, [on Tuesday tweeted a claim that a "poll"](#) had found that "92% of Republican Voters think the election was rigged!" It's unclear who or what entity performed the survey.

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FDA Panel Recommends Moderna Vaccine for Emergency Use Authorization
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Medical staffers began administering the first dosages of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on Monday. With a US Food and Drug Administration emergency use authorization, a Moderna vaccine could soon become the second approved for use across the country.

The [Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee](#) of the FDA voted 20-0 in favor of recommending emergency authorization of a Moderna COVID-19 vaccine for those 18 years or older.

Michael Kurilla, the director of clinical innovation at the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, was the only abstention.

Kurilla explained that he was not confident enough to cast a yes vote because, he detailed, he thought the wording of the emergency use authorization was "too broad."

"A blanket statement for individuals 18 years and older is far too broad," he said, [reported by STAT](#).

By approving a Moderna vaccine, the board is communicating that the benefits of the vaccine outweigh the risks for those age 18 or older.

"I would prefer to see it more targeted towards people at high risk of serious and life threatening COVID disease," Kurilla added.

If the FDA's track mirrors that of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, then a Moderna vaccine could obtain official FDA emergency authorization by Friday.

US health officials believe that some 20 million Americans would be able to receive their first dose of the Moderna or Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine by the year's end, [according to The Hill](#).

Both vaccines, which require two rounds of injections, use messenger RNA to inform the body's cells to create copies of the SARS-CoV-2 virus exterior spike protein. The body then uses these copies as learning tools to begin to detect and attack the virus.

Per a \$1.5 billion deal with Moderna, the US is slated to receive some 20 million doses of its vaccine this month and 100 million in the fourth quarter.

As for the already-approved vaccine, at least four state governors, including Democratic Washington Governor Jay Inslee, have expressed that they have been given conflicting data on the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine shipments and rollouts.

Inslee tweeted on Thursday that the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention informed the state "that WA's vaccine allocation will be cut by 40 percent next week — and that all states are seeing similar cuts."

He claims no explanation was provided.

However, federal officials from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) - which contains the CDC - have stated that nothing has changed.

"Reports that jurisdictions' allocations are being reduced are incorrect," an HHS spokesperson [said in a statement](#) provided to NBC. "As was done with the initial shipments of Pfizer vaccine, jurisdictions will receive vaccine at different sites over several days."

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Atlantic City Offering Auction Bidders Chance to 'Implode Trump Plaza'
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The bidding war, organized by Bodnar's Auction, is set to go live on January 19, 2021, 10 days before the scheduled demolition of the former casino and just one day before the anticipated inauguration of US President-elect Joe Biden.

Local officials in Atlantic City, New Jersey, are looking raise cash for charity using the infamy of one of its former business owners: US President Donald Trump.

Atlantic City Mayor Marty Small announced this week that the coastal resort city will soon begin accepting bids for the chance to destroy the former Trump Plaza, the building which housed the US president's Atlantic City casino from 1984 to 2014.

"Some of Atlantic City's iconic moments happened there, but on his way out, Donald Trump openly mocked Atlantic City, saying he made a lot of money and then got out," [Small told the Associated Press](#). "I wanted to use the demolition of this place to raise money for charity."

The mayor hopes the winning bid for the January 29 demolition will top \$1 million.

The Bodnar's Auction sale, which goes live at 1:00 p.m. EST on January 19, 2021, offers potential bidders "a once in a lifetime opportunity to bid on the right to push the button to implode Trump Plaza."

"For several years it has been sitting empty and now is the time to end an era and replace it with something new. We are selling the experience to push the button to implode Trump Plaza," [the auction page details](#). "This will be done remotely and can be done anywhere in the world as well as close to the Plaza as we can safely get you there!"

All proceeds from the auction will reportedly benefit the Boys & Girls Club of Atlantic City.

While the building presently retains Trump's name, the US president [only owned 10% of Trump Entertainment Resorts](#) - which included the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort, Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino and Trump Marina Hotel Casino, all in Atlantic City - after the company declared bankruptcy in 2009.

The company would later file for Chapter 11 protection in 2014 before falling into the hands of owner Carl Icahn, the billionaire businessman and Indian Creek Island resident who [may become the new neighbor of Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump](#).

Small told the AP that Icahn is looking forward to the post-demolition possibilities of the Atlantic City plot.

“Not often does inner-city oceanfront land open up,” the mayor explained. “We have one chance to get this right.”

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Boeing 'Inappropriately Influenced' FAA During Boeing 737 Max 8 Recertification - Senate Committee
by [Evan Craighead](#)

United Airlines announced on Friday that the Boeing 737 MAX 8 would be returning to the skies beginning February 11, 2021. The aircraft was grounded worldwide in March 2019 following the twin crashes of Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302.

A 18 December report published by the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation revealed that employees of both Boeing and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) worked together to manipulate recertification tests of the Boeing 737 MAX 8 following two fatal crashes that together killed a 346.

[The 102-page report](#), which comes some 20 months after the aircraft was grounded, detailed that Boeing “inappropriately influenced FAA human factor simulator testing of pilot reaction times involving a Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS) failure.”

The [MCAS serves as a flight control system](#) designed to enhance the Boeing 737 MAX's pitch stability so that it feels and flies like other 737s.

“Twenty months ago, the Commerce Committee launched an investigation into FAA safety oversight. We have received disclosures from more than 50 whistleblowers, conducted numerous FAA staff interviews, and reviewed over 15,000 pages of relevant documents,” Rep. Roger Wicker (R-MS), chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, wrote [in his news release](#).

“Our findings are troubling. The report details a number of significant examples of lapses in aviation safety oversight and failed leadership in the FAA. It is clear that the agency requires consistent oversight to ensure their work to protect the flying public is executed fully and correctly.”

The Senate committee also alleged that senior FAA managers have yet to be appropriately reprimanded or held accountable for the “failure to develop and deliver adequate training in flight standards, despite repeated findings of deficiencies over several decades.”

In addition, senior FAA leadership may have obstructed a review of the 737 MAX 8 crashes initiated by Department of Transportation Office of Inspector General.

“FAA and Boeing were attempting to cover up important information that may have contributed to the 737 MAX tragedies,” the report alleges.

[On Friday, it was reported](#) by United Airlines that the Boeing 737 MAX 8 will resume flights out of its Denver, Colorado, and Houston, Texas, facilities. Other aircraft will reportedly be made available for those travelers uneasy about boarding the ill-starred aircraft.

“We will be fully transparent with our customers and will communicate in advance when they are booked to fly on a Max aircraft,” United Airlines wrote in a Friday news release.

US Approves Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine for Emergency Use - Drug Agency

* US * FDA * COVID *

WASHINGTON, December 19 (Sputnik) - The US government has greenlighted the Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine for emergency use, a regulator agency said in a statement.

"Today, the US Food and Drug Administration issued an emergency use authorization (EUA) for the second vaccine for the prevention of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The emergency use authorization allows the Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine to be distributed in the US for use in individuals 18 years of age and older," the agency said on Friday.

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US State Dept. Notifies Congress of Intent to Close Last 2 Consulates in Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration informed Congress that the United States will shut its two remaining consulates in Russia, The Washington Post reported. The State Department told lawmakers last week the US would permanently close the consulate in Vladivostok and temporarily suspend operations at the one in Yekaterinburg, the report said Friday.

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Pentagon Awards \$4.6Bln Abrams Tank Contract

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - General Dynamics Land Systems (GDLS) has received a more than \$4.6 billion US Army contract to produce Abrams M1A2 SEPv3 Main Battle Tanks (MPTs), the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"General Dynamics Land Systems [of] Sterling Heights, Michigan was awarded a \$4.62 billion... contract to produce Abrams M1A2 SEPv3 tanks," the release stated on Friday.

Work on the contract will take seven and a half years and is scheduled to be completed on June 17, 2028. The US Army Contracting Command, Detroit Arsenal, Michigan, is the contracting activity, the release said.

The Abrams M1A2 SEPv3 (System Enhanced Package) is a modernized version of the Abrams main battle tank (MBT) in service with the US Army.

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US Congress Passes Stopgap Funding to Avert Shutdown, Bill Heads to Trump to Sign

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The US Congress has passed legislation to extend government spending for two days in order to avert a shutdown.

The House of Representatives and the Senate passed the government spending bill on Friday before funding expired at midnight.

Congressional Democrats and Republicans are continuing to negotiate a funding bill for 2021. Earlier in the day, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said the Senate will stay in session as long as it takes to ensure they pass a compromise omnibus spending bill to fund the federal government, possibly with a novel coronavirus financial aid package attached.

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IMF Allows Egypt to Draw \$1.6Bln in Economic Support Amid COVID-19 Outbreak - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a press release that it has completed a review that clears the way for Egypt to draw \$1.67 billion in economic support.

"The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) completed today the first review of Egypt's economic reform program supported by a 12-month Stand-By Arrangement (SBA), allowing the authorities to draw SDR 1,158.04 million (about US\$1.67 billion)," the release said on Friday.

IMF Deputy Managing Director Antoinette Sayeh said in the release that Egypt has managed its economy well amid the novel coronavirus pandemic and is one of the few countries with a positive growth rate this year.

Egypt's economic recovery, however, is still at risk as a second wave of the pandemic sweeps through the country, Sayeh added.

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Boeing, US Regulator Cover Up May Have Contributed to 737 MAX Crashes - US Senate Panel

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - Boeing and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) covered up information that may have had a part in the deadly 737 MAX crashes, the US Senate Committee on Commerce said in an investigation report.

"During 737 MAX recertification testing, Boeing inappropriately influenced FAA human factor simulator testing of pilot reaction times involving a Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS) failure," the report said on Friday.

The Commerce Committee's investigation also found that insufficient training could have contributed to the faulty certification process for the 737 Max aircraft, the report said.

The investigation found that the FAA has retaliated against whistleblowers instead of welcoming the disclosures made in the interest of safety, the report also said.

FAA senior leaders may have obstructed a Transportation Department Inspector General review of the 737 MAX crashes, the report added.

The aircraft was initially grounded following two fatal accidents in October of 2018 and in March of 2019. Investigations into the crashes revealed errors in the functioning of the jet's piloting system, lapses in Boeing's safety standard procedures and cover-ups by company officials.

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Stress Tests Show US Banks Can Survive, Lend in Another COVID Like Crash -Fed's Quarles

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US banks are likely to survive another major economic downturn like that triggered by the COVID-19 and continue their lending if they continue to demonstrate qualities shown in two rounds of stress tests this year, Federal Reserve Vice Chair Randal Quarles said.

"The banking system has been a source of strength during the past year and today's stress test results confirm that large banks could continue to lend to households and businesses even during a sharply adverse future turn in the economy," Quarles, the Fed's vice chair for supervision, said in a statement.

He said the Fed's first stress test at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak showed that while US banks generally had strong levels of capital, "considerable economic uncertainty remained." As a follow-up, the central bank put several restrictions in place to ensure that banks would preserve capital, including suspending share repurchases and limiting dividends.

"With the restrictions in place, large banks have recently built capital, despite setting aside about \$100 billion in loan loss reserves," Quarles said.

He added that the latest stress tests included two hypothetical scenarios with severe global recessions: The first scenario featured an unemployment rate that spiked to 12.5 percent and then declined to about 7.5 percent, while the second scenario included a peak unemployment rate of 11 percent followed by a more modest decline to 9 percent.

"Under both scenarios, large banks would collectively have more than \$600 billion in total losses, considerably higher than the first stress test this year. However, their capital ratios would decline from an average starting point of 12.2 percent to 9.6 percent in the more severe scenario, well above the 4.5 percent minimum. All firms' risk-based capital ratios would remain above the required minimum," he added.

With the current capital requirements and distribution restrictions in place, banks were found to have built capital over the past year, and the largest can still lend to households and businesses, Quarles concluded.

The US economy shrank by 5 percent in the first quarter and a record 31.4 percent in the subsequent three months on COVID-19 induced lockdowns, before rebounding by 33.1 percent in the third quarter.

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Trump Signs Bill That Could Block Some Chinese Companies From US Exchanges

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump has signed legislation into law that could block some Chinese companies from engaging in exchanges in the US stock market, the White House said in a press release.

"On Friday, December 18, 2020, the President signed into law: S. 945, the 'Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act,' which requires certain issuers of securities to establish that they are not owned or controlled by a foreign government, specifically if the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board is unable to audit specified reports because the issuer has retained a foreign public accounting firm that is not subject to inspection by the Board," the release said on Friday.

The US House of Representatives passed the measure earlier this month and the Senate passed it in May.

The measure requires foreign companies to disclose if they are state-owned or controlled and bans foreign companies from trading on the US stock market if they fail to comply with US auditing standards.

Senator John Kennedy, who introduced the bill in March of 2019, said the measure would stop China from cheating on the US stock exchanges, adding that Beijing's failure to comply with US disclosure laws has already impacted investor confidence and the integrity of financial markets.

The United States has been able to enter into cooperative auditing agreements with foreign regulators but it has not reached such an agreement with China.

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US Seizes 2 Fake Coronavirus Vaccine Websites - US Attorney

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The US authorities have seized two fake websites pretending to belong to the biotech companies producing coronavirus vaccines, US Attorney for the District of Maryland Robert Hur said.

"The US Attorney's Office and our law enforcement partners are committed to bringing to justice the criminals that try to take advantage of this global pandemic to line their pockets at the expense of the most vulnerable," Hur said on Friday about the seizure of the mordernatx.com and regeneronmedicals.com websites.

Hur urged Americans to remain vigilant and avoid using websites and links from unsolicited messages as well as send them personal information.

The Justice Department said in a statement that both websites were detected last week by private and governmental security entities.

"Additional investigation revealed that the mordernatx.com domain name was registered on about December 8, 2020, through a company headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, with no personal information for the registrar listed," the statement said.

The other website, regeneronmedical.com, was registered two days earlier and lists the registrant as an individual residing in Nigeria, the statement said.

"By seizing these sites, the government has prevented third parties from acquiring the names and using them to commit additional crimes, as well as prevented third parties from continuing to access the sites in their present form," the statement added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) -

NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST CHINA, RUSSIA, VENEZUELA

* The US Department of Commerce announced on Friday that it has blacklisted China's leading drone manufacturer DJI as well as 59 scientific and industrial entities in the country.

* The United States had added two Russia-based firms and a Russian national to its economic blacklist, the Commerce Department announced in an update to its entity list.

* The United States has imposed Venezuela-related sanctions against Ex-CLE Soluciones Biometricas and two individuals linked to the company, the US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said.

BULGARIA EXPELS RUSSIAN DIPLOMAT

* A Russian diplomat is being expelled from Bulgaria on suspicion of espionage, the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office said on Friday.

* Bulgaria's expulsion of a Russian diplomat is groundless and is not helping promote a dialogue, the Russian embassy in the country said.

PENTAGON PAUSES BRIEFING BIDEN TRANSITION TEAM

* The US Defense Department will continue working with the Biden transition team after a holiday pause that was mutually agreed upon, Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller said in a statement on Friday.

* The transition team of US President-elect Joe Biden and the Defense Department did not reach an agreement to pause briefings during the Holidays, senior transition aide Yohannes Abraham said.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH DEVELOPMENTS

* A demining group of serviceman died of injuries sustained during an explosion of a mine in Nagorno-Karabakh city of Shusha, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

* As many as 470 people returned to their Nagorno-Karabakh homes from Armenia over the past 24-hour period, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Azerbaijan and Armenia may soon hold a new prisoner exchange, an aide to the leader of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh republic told Sputnik.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* Russian Health Minister Mikhail Murashko and his German counterpart Jens Spahn discussed the possibility of a joint production of coronavirus vaccines, the Russian Health Ministry said.

* Developers of Russia's EpiVacCorona vaccine took cognizance of the possible mutations of the virus and this is why the vaccine will not be outdated, Russia's public health watchdog Rospotrebnadzor told Sputnik.

* The United States has approved the Moderna vaccine against the coronavirus and is set to start distribution at once, President Donald Trump said.

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Trump Speaks With Macron to Wish Him Speedy Recovery - White House

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump in a recent telephone call with France's President Emmanuel Macron wished him a speedy recovery after the French leader was infected with the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), White House Deputy Press Secretary Judd Deere said in a statement on Friday.

"Yesterday, President Donald Trump spoke with President Emmanuel Macron of France. President Trump wished President Macron a speedy recovery and quick return to his full duties," Deere said via Twitter.

On Thursday, the Elysee palace reported that Macron tested positive for COVID-19. The president has self-isolated at La Lanterne residence in Versailles and continues to work remotely.

Earlier in the day, Macron said he was experiencing fatigue and headaches.

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US Indicts Russian Citizen, 2 Bulgarians for Illegal Exports to Russia - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - A US federal grand jury has lodged a criminal indictment against a Russian citizen and two Bulgarians over an alleged attempt to illegally export to Russia "sensitive radiation-hardened circuits" from the United States, the Department of Justice said on Friday.

"A four-count federal grand jury indictment returned in Austin and unsealed today charges three foreign nationals – a Russian citizen and two Bulgarian citizens – with violating the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), Export Control Reform Act (ECRA), and a money laundering statute in a scheme to procure sensitive radiation-hardened circuits from the US and ship those components to Russia through Bulgaria without required licenses," the statement said.

The indictment alleges that 48-year-old Russian national Ilias Sabirov, 70-year-old Bulgarian national Dimitar Dimitrov and 46-year-old Bulgarian national Milan Dimitrov used Bulgarian company Multi Technology Integration Group EOD (MTIG) to receive controlled items from the US and send them to Russia.

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Biden Hits Out at Trump Administration for Tying Fed Down Amid COVID - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US President-Elect Joe Biden hit out at the Trump administration in a statement on Friday for trying to clip the wings of the Federal Reserve amid the COVID-19.

Earlier, White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow said the Trump administration "strongly supports" restrictions on the Fed's use of treasury funds for emergency lending programs. "While we are encouraged by the bipartisan effort underway to provide critical relief to millions of Americans, the package should not include unnecessary provisions that would hamper the Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve's ability to fight economic crises," Biden said as Democrat lawmakers from his party tried to reach a COVID-19 relief deal in Congress with Trump's Republican party.

Kudlow's remarks were in follow-through to Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin's directive to the Fed in November that it return an unused portion of \$455 billion allocated to the central bank for emergency lending programs under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act that are set to expire at the end of the year.

Fed officials had expressed surprise at Mnuchin's decision to try and claw back the funds when the central bank's lending programs were still on and while economic stress from the COVID-19 was accelerating.

Mnuchin, who will leave office with the rest of the Trump cabinet when Biden is sworn in on January 20, denied that politics was a factor in the move.

Biden said that it was in the interests of the American people to maintain the Fed's ability to respond quickly and forcefully to the crisis.

"Undermining that authority could mean less lending to Main Street businesses, higher unemployment, and greater economic pain across the nation," he said. "Congress's good faith effort to deliver immediate relief should not be delayed by provisions that could put our future financial stability at risk."

Congress passed the CARES Act in March, dispensing roughly \$3 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

In the past few months, however, Democrats in the House of Representatives and Republicans in the Senate were locked in a bitter disagreement about a successive relief plan. The stalemate was broken nearly three weeks ago after a bipartisan group proposed a \$908 billion relief bill, which led the two sides to resume negotiations.

The US economy shrank by 5 percent in the first quarter and a record 31.4 percent in the subsequent three months on COVID-19 induced lockdowns, before rebounding by 33.1 percent in the third quarter.

Despite the rebound and hope offered now by vaccines, the coronavirus pandemic has raged anew in the United States in recent weeks, after a respite in the summer to early fall period. Infections have crossed 17 million since January, hospitalization has hit daily record highs of above 100,000 and deaths have breached 300,000.

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US Supreme Court Dismisses Challenge to Trump Census Plan

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Friday declined to hear a challenge to President Donald Trump's plan to exclude immigrants from the national census count.

"Because plaintiffs have not shown standing and because the claims presented are not ripe for adjudication, the District Court's judgment is vacated, and the case is remanded with instructions to dismiss for lack of jurisdiction," the court's ruling said.

The three dissenting votes came from the only liberal-leaning judges on the conservative majority high court.

The Census, taken in 2020 and every decade, is politically important because the number of congressional districts allocated to every state is based upon its population. Immigrants, especially illegal ones, overwhelmingly congregate in large generally Democratic-voting states like New York and California.

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US House, Senate Leaders Receive Pfizer's COVID-19 Vaccine

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US House and Senate leaders Nancy Pelosi and Mitch McConnell said Friday they received Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine.

"Today, with confidence in science and at the direction of the Office of the Attending Physician, I received the COVID-19 vaccine," Pelosi said via Twitter.

McConnell in a statement said he received "the safe, effective COVID vaccine" following continuity-of-government protocols.

Both leaders urged Americans to take safety measures in order to avoid the infection.

"As the vaccine is being distributed, we must all continue mask wearing, social distancing and other science-based steps," Pelosi said.

US Vice President Mike Pence and his wife Second Lady Karen Pence received Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccination in public earlier on Friday, becoming the first senior White House officials to undergo the procedure.

Despite hope offered by vaccines, the coronavirus pandemic has raged anew in the United States in recent weeks, after a respite in the summer to early fall period. Infections have crossed 17 million, hospitalization has hit daily record highs of above 100,000 and the death toll has breached 310,000 in total.

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US House Panel Republicans Call for Response to Cyber Espionage Operation

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - Republican members of the US House Armed Services Committee said in a statement on Friday that America must respond to a massive cyber attack attributed by local media to Russian-backed hackers.

Russia denies any involvement and US authorities are yet to name suspects of an intrusion into government and private networks.

"Our nation must respond to the reported cyber espionage operation targeting America's nuclear infrastructure and federal government and hold the perpetrator accountable. This attack serves as a stark warning that our nation must bolster its cybersecurity posture and capabilities, and it must do so without delay," the congressmen said.

The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency warned earlier this week that federal, state and local governmental institutions, critical infrastructures and private entities are in "grave" risk as a result of the attack by "an advanced persistent threat actor." The Washington Post alleged that a group of hackers supposedly linked to the Russian intelligence may be behind the intrusion but provided no proof. Russia's Embassy in Washington dismissed accusations as unfounded.

Armed Services Committee Republicans also praised the national defense budget as vital for bolstering US cyber protection.

"There is no doubt that our adversaries will take advantage of any opportunity to attack vulnerabilities in our cyber infrastructure. The measures in this year's bill will provide critical

safeguards to protect the information and capabilities most foundational to our nation's security," the statement said. Committee Republicans added that the budget allocates \$375 million for cyber security of nuclear weapons production facilities.

The bill, approved by the Congress, is about to be vetoed by President Donald Trump, who is unhappy about the its failure to address an issue of legal immunity for social media and plans to rename military bases that celebrate Confederate leaders.

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Biden Transition Team Did Not Agree With Pentagon on Holiday Pause - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The transition team of US President-elect Joe Biden and the Defense Department did not reach an agreement to pause briefings during the Holidays, senior transition aide Yohannes Abraham said on Friday.

"Let me be clear, There was no mutually agreed upon holiday break," Abraham told reporters. "In fact, we think it's important for briefings and other engagements to continue."

Abraham emphasized that the Biden transition team hopes and expects the meetings and requests for information will resume immediately.

Acting US Defense Secretary Chris Miller said in a statement on Friday that the US Defense Department will continue working with the Biden transition team after a holiday pause which was mutually agreed upon.

Miller's comments came after the news website Axios said earlier in the day citing unnamed senior Trump administration officials that the Defense Department has suspended briefings for the Biden transition team on Miller's orders.

Miller said the Defense Department has so far conducted 139 interviews with 265 officials, responded to 161 requests for information and provided 4,400 pages of controlled non-public information and 900 pages of classified information.

He also said the Defense Department continues to schedule interviews with senior leaders and career officials and is now working to reschedule some 20 interviews with 40 officials until after January 1.

On Monday, the Electoral College convened in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia and gave Biden 306 electoral votes and gave Trump 232 electoral votes. Congress will meet on January 5 to count the votes and confirm the victor. While the Biden team has started the transition process, Trump still refuses to concede.

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US Imposes Venezuela-Related Sanctions Against 1 Company, 2 Persons - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed Venezuela-related sanctions against Ex-Cle Soluciones Biometricas and two individuals linked to the company, the US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a statement on Friday.

"The following individuals have been added to OFAC's SDN List: MACHADO REQUENA, Marcos Javier, Caracas... SAN AGUSTIN, Guillermo Carlos," the statement said. "The following entity has been added to OFAC's SDN List: EX-CLE SOLUCIONES BIOMETRICAS C.A." In a separate statement, the Treasury Department said the sanctions were imposed over allegations that the company provided support to the government of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro by helping carry out fraudulent parliamentary elections this month. Ex-Cle Soluciones Biometricas sells electoral hardware and software to the Venezuelan government agencies and officials, the Treasury Department added.

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States Other Than Russia May Be Behind Massive Hack Against US Government - Kudlow

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - Countries other than Russia could be behind the massive cyber attack on US government networks, White House Economic Adviser Larry Kudlow said on Friday.

"People are saying [it is] Russia. I don't know that. It could be other countries. I just don't know," Kudlow told reporters.

On Monday, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said federal, state and local governmental institutions, critical infrastructures and private entities face a grave threat as a result of the ongoing cyber attack. CISA said the attack has been ongoing since at least March and attributed it to an advanced persistent threat actor.

The Washington Post alleged that a hacking group supposedly to the Russian intelligence may be behind the hacking but provided no evidence to back its claims.

Russia's Embassy in the United States dismissed the media allegations as unfounded.

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US Federal Reserve Keen to Address Climate Change in Post-Trump Era - Governor Brainard

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve looks forward to working with other world central banks in addressing gaps in climate change, Governor Lael Brainard said Friday, making the Fed among the first government institutions to advocate for active engagement on climate issues in the post-Trump era.

"We look forward to learning from and collaborating with foreign central banks on addressing data gaps and undertaking research on the implications of climate change for financial stability and the economy," Brainard said in a live-streamed discussion on climate change and the financial system. "In the years ahead, there will be significant opportunities for collaboration across the US regulatory agencies in strengthening the US financial system to meet the challenge of climate change."

Brainard's comments were a sign that major US government institutions were rethinking their role on climate engagement after four years of President Donald Trump's rule which basically disengaged US financial and other commitments on that front, most notably pulling the country out of the Paris Accord on the climate.

President-Elect Joe Biden, who takes office on January 20, has vowed to put the United States back on track to the goal of halving carbon emissions by 2030.

Brainard said the Fed was making progress toward incorporating climate considerations that it deemed material and relevant to its responsibilities as a financial gatekeeper.

"Just as there are risks, there are also promising opportunities for private-sector investments in low-carbon innovation, infrastructure, energy, and transportation," she said. "With support from accounting standard setters, credit rating agencies, and regulators, the financial system can provide useful signals to help the private sector manage climate risks and facilitate a smooth transition."

She said the Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures, a private sector-led initiative with support from the Fed, had nearly 1,500 organizations with a combined market capitalization of \$12.6 trillion, including financial institutions that own or manage assets of \$150 trillion, to support climate change issues.

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US Sanctions Target Chinese Entities Contributing to Militarization of S. China Sea - Ross

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned Chinese entities contributing to militarization of disputed areas in the South China Sea and engaging in coercion of other coastal states, US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said on Friday.

"The additions also include entities that have contributed to China's militarization of disputed outposts in the South China Sea, unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea, and intimidation and coercion of other coastal states lawfully accessing and developing offshore marine resources," Ross said.

The Commerce Department has also targeted additional persons engaged in China's campaign of malign technology acquisition efforts, such as stealing US trade secrets, and in the support of research, development and production of advanced weapons systems by utilizing the theft, Ross added.

According to the Commerce Department, 77 Chinese entities have been added to the new US sanctions list.

Ross said China's corrupt and bullying behavior both inside and outside its borders harms US national security interests, undermines the sovereignty of our allies and partners, and violates the human rights and dignity of ethnic and religious minority groups.

"Commerce will act to ensure that America's technology - developed and produced according to open and free-market principles - is not used for malign or abusive purposes," he added.

China claims the South China Sea as sovereign territory and has built military bases on artificial created islands. The United States views the South China Sea as an international waterway and sends warships to routinely patrol the waterways in so-called freedom of navigation exercises.

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Pentagon Agreed With Biden Team to Continue Working After Holiday Pause - Acting Chief

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department will continue working with the Biden transition team after a holiday pause which was mutually agreed upon, Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller said in a statement on Friday.

Earlier on Friday, the news website Axios said citing unnamed senior Trump administration officials that the Defense Department has suspended briefings for the Biden transition team on Miller's orders.

"The Department of Defense will continue to provide all required support to the Agency Review Team (ART) to keep our nation and her citizens safe... At no time has the Department canceled or declined any interview," Miller said. "After the mutually-agreed upon holiday pause, which begins tomorrow, we will continue with the transition and rescheduled meetings from today."

Miller noted that the Defense Department has so far conducted 139 interviews with 265 officials, responded to 161 requests for information and provided 4,400 pages of controlled non-public information and 900 pages of classified information.

Miller also said the Defense Department continues to schedule interviews with senior leaders and career officials and is now working to reschedule some 20 interviews with 40 officials until after January 1.

"Our key focus in the next two weeks is supporting essential requests for information on OWS and COVID-19 information to guarantee a flawless transition. This is my major focus area," Miller said. "Again, I remain committed to a full and transparent transition - this is what our nation expects and the [Defense Department] will deliver as it always has."

On Monday, the Electoral College convened in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia and gave Biden 306 electoral votes and gave Trump 232 electoral votes. Congress will meet on January 5 to count the votes and confirm the victor.

While the Biden team has started the transition process, Trump continues his legal challenges in state and federal courts, saying he won the election but it was stolen from him by massive fraud and acts of impropriety.

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US Blacklists China's Leading Drone Manufacturer DJI, 59 Other Entities

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Commerce announced on Friday that it blacklisted China's leading drone manufacturer DJI as well as 59 scientific and industrial entities in the country for actions deemed contrary to the national security or foreign policy interest of the United States.

Being added to the Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security list means the entities have been designated as a national security concern and restrictions have been imposed on them regarding cooperating with the United States.

Among other additions to the blacklist are the Beijing Institute of Technology, numerous research and testing subsidiaries of the China State Shipbuilding Corporation, the Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics and semiconductor manufacturers.

The Commerce Department said in a statement that the blacklisted Chinese entities enabled human rights abuses, supported the militarization in the South China Sea, acquired US-origin items for the People's Liberation Army's programs or engaged in the theft of US trade secrets. "China's corrupt and bullying behavior both inside and outside its borders harms US national security interests, undermines the sovereignty of our allies and partners, and violates the human rights and dignity of ethnic and religious minority groups," Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross said.

China has routinely denied any wrongdoing with respect to the United States' allegations. Ross vowed that the Commerce Department will act to ensure that the United States' technology is not used for "malign or abusive purposes."

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Canadian Company Pleads Guilty in US Court to Dumping Waste Water in Lake Ontario

* US * CANADA * POLLUTION *

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - A Canadian company has plead guilty in US federal court to dumping waste water into Lake Ontario situated between the province of Ontario and New York State, the US Justice Department said in a statement on Friday.

"US Attorney James P. Kennedy, Jr. announced today that the Algoma Central Corporation, headquartered in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, pleaded guilty before US Magistrate Judge

H. Kenneth Schroeder, Jr. to a negligent violation of the Clean Water Act and will face a significant fine" the statement said.

During the delivery of the Strongfield maritime vessel to Algoma, the ship accumulated oily bilge water after a mechanical failure. However, during the ship's final transition in the waters of the United States within the Western District of New York an officer requested permission to discharge the contents of the compartment where the toxic residue was stored and approximately 11,887 gallons of unprocessed oily bilge water were released in Lake Ontario. Algoma, based in St. Catherines, Ontario, did inform Canadian and US authorities of the incident shortly after the dump.

The amount of the fine has not been determined yet and sentencing is scheduled for April 14, 2021 in a Buffalo, New York.

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An addition to the list of the Department's Bureau of Industry and Security means a designation of the entities as a national security concern and imposes restrictions on them to cooperate with the United States.

Among other additions to the blacklist are the Beijing Institute of Technology, numerous research and testing subsidiaries of the China State Shipbuilding Corporation, the Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics and semiconductor manufacturers.

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US Blacklists Russian Companies Cosmos Complect, Sovtest Comp, Citizen Sabirov - Commerce

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The United States had added two Russia-based firms and a Russian national to its economic blacklist, the Commerce Department announced in an update to its entity list on Friday.

"From the Federal Register Notice to be published today: For the reasons described above, this final rule adds the following seventy-seven entities, under a total of seventy-eight entries, to the Entity List: ... RUSSIA (3)," the notice said.

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US Congressmen Say Given Insufficient Information on Massive Hack, Seek Another Briefing

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US congressmen said that a classified briefing on Friday failed to provide sufficient information about the massive cyber attack on government networks and invited Trump administration officials to provide another briefing.

"It was incomplete to say the least... We were looking for some additional specificity that didn't come about," US House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson said. "We know we have a very deep problem, the length of the problem is still being identified. So it's a work in progress. Attribution is still a concern of ours as members of Congress."

Two congressional committees - on Homeland Security and Oversight and Reform - were briefed over the telephone by members of the US administration. Several participants who agreed to talk to reporters complained that they were given "the barest minimum of information." "Several members made references to the fact that we will find more about what is going on from the news media than this briefing," Thompson said. "It just didn't give us what we wanted. They offered to come next week, and we said 'Next week? Are you serious?' And we invited them back tomorrow. That's our expectation."

On Thursday, the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) warned that governmental institutions, critical infrastructures and private entities are facing a grave threat as a result of the attack. CISA did not identify suspects, but attributed the intrusion underway since at least March to an advanced persistent threat actor. CISA also said removing malware from "compromised environments" will be "highly complex and challenging."

The Washington Post alleged that a hacking group supposedly linked to the Russian government was likely behind the hacking but gave no proof for its claims. Russia's Embassy in Washington dismissed the media accusations as unfounded.

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US Telecom Executive Disrupted Video Meetings on Tiananmen Massacre - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - A China-based executive of a US telecom company faces charges for disrupting video meetings earlier this year held to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, the US Department of Justice said in a release on Friday.

"A complaint and arrest warrant were unsealed today in federal court in Brooklyn charging Xinjiang Jin, also known as 'Julien Jin,' with conspiracy to commit interstate harassment and unlawful conspiracy to transfer a means of identification," the release said.

The Justice Department said Jin coordinated with the Beijing government to target dissidents and disrupt meetings.

Jin was an employee of the US-based telecommunications firm called Company-1 and he was based in China where he "allegedly participated in a scheme to disrupt a series of meetings in May and June 2020 held to commemorate the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in the PRC," the release said.

The meetings were conducted using a videoconferencing program provided by Company-1, and were organized and hosted by US-based individuals, including individuals residing in the Eastern District of New York, the release added.

However, Jin is not in US custody, the release acknowledged.

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One in Five Prisoners in US Test Positive for Coronavirus - Report

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - One in five jailed prisoners in the United States - at least 275,000 men and women - in both federal and state penitentiaries have tested positive for the novel coronavirus and more than 1,700 have died, a study by the Marshall Project announced on Friday.

"One in every five state and federal prisoners in the United States has tested positive for the coronavirus, a rate more than four times as high as the general population. In some states, more than half of prisoners have been infected," the Marshall Project report said.

The report was compiled in collaboration with the Associated Press, the Marshall Project said.

The rate of infection in the US prison system is more than four times higher than that among the general population, the report also said.

"New cases in prisons this week reached their highest level since testing began in the spring, far outstripping previous peaks in April and August," the report added.

Some 5,100 prisoners got infected in jails in Kansas, the third-highest rate for any state in the United States, behind only South Dakota and Arkansas, according to the report.

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Pentagon Suspends Briefings for Biden Transition Team - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department has suspended briefings for the transition team of President-elect Joe Biden, Axios reported on Friday, citing senior administration officials.

Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller ordered halting cooperation with the Biden transition team, although a top Biden official said he did not know about the directive, the report said.

Biden administration officials, who claimed they did not know about the reasoning behind Miller's decision and whether President Donald Trump approved it, also noted that they believe there is a chance for cooperation to recommence after the holidays, the report said.

On Monday, the Electoral College convened in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia and gave Biden 306 electoral votes and gave Trump 232 electoral votes. Congress will meet on January 5 to count the votes and confirm the victor.

While the Biden team has started the transition process, Trump continues his legal challenges in state and federal courts, saying he won the election but it was stolen from him by massive fraud and acts of impropriety.

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US Vice President, Second Lady Get COVID-19 Vaccination in Public

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Mike Pence and his wife Second Lady Karen Pence received Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccination in public on Friday, becoming the first senior White House officials to undergo the procedure.

"I didn't feel a thing. Well done, and I appreciate your service to the country," Pence told the team of nurses who administered the vaccines.

The pair was joined by Surgeon General Jerome Adams, who was also vaccinated live on television. President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania, both of whom have already contracted COVID-19, have not said when they will get immunized for the virus.

Pence also said the United States will be ready to ship nearly 6 million doses of coronavirus vaccines by next week if Moderna Inc gets final clearance later on Friday for its vaccine to join Pfizer in distribution.

"In fact, under Operation Warp Speed, we are poised to have vaccines for 20 million Americans before the end of December," Pence said, referring to the Trump administration's vaccine task force for the pandemic.

Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine late on Thursday was voted safe for emergency use by a Food and Drug Administration advisory panel. US Health Secretary Alex Azar has also said he expects the vaccine to be cleared by the FDA for distribution by the end of Friday.

Azar said last week he expected some 100 million Americans to be immunized against the virus by the end of February, following approval granted to the Pfizer vaccine.

The White House has contracted for 800 million COVID-19 vaccines from five drugmakers in all, with options to get up to 3 billion doses, Azar added.

Despite hope offered by vaccines, the coronavirus pandemic has raged anew in the United States in recent weeks, after a respite in the summer to early fall period. Infections have crossed 17 million since January, hospitalization has hit daily record highs of above 100,000 and the death toll has breached 310,000 in total.

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Trump Plans to Issue Wave of Presidential Pardons Today - Axios

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump intends to issue a number of pardons today ahead of the Christmas holiday, Axios reported on Friday, citing sources with direct knowledge of the plans.

While it remains unclear who will be included in the batch of pardons, the sources said family members, friends and allies could be among them, the report said.

The media outlet noted that Trump has considered granting pardons for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and his former campaign manager Paul Manafort.

Senator Rand Paul has urged Trump to pardon Edward Snowden, but the Axios report cited a source close to the planning as saying they did not expect the American whistle-blower to be included among today's pardons.

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Trump Says US Approves Moderna Vaccine Against COVID-19, FDA Declines to Confirm

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump on Friday said United States had approved the US-made Moderna vaccine against the coronavirus, but the Food and Drug Administration in comments to Sputnik declined to confirm the claim.

"Moderna vaccine overwhelmingly approved. Distribution to start immediately," Trump said on Twitter.

When contacted by Sputnik, however, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) declined to confirm Trump's announcement and instead forwarded a press release it had issued on Thursday.

That release noted that earlier on Thursday, an FDA advisory panel overwhelmingly recommended that the FDA grant an emergency use authorization for the vaccine, saying the benefits outweigh the risks.

The FDA in the release said it had informed Moderna that it will work rapidly toward finalization and issuance of an emergency use authorization.

The emergency use authorization is widely expected to be formally announced later on Friday.

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