

Wednesday 12/23/20

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UK's NHS Frontline Doctors Express Concern Over Pace of COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution by [Mary F.](#)

Medical staff members in the US and the UK are currently receiving the COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech, which is based on messenger RNA technology, a new type of treatment that works by providing instructions to healthy cells to generate antibodies for a certain antigen.

Employees at the National Health Service (NHS), the publicly-funded health care system of the United Kingdom, are frustrated that administrative staff members are being offered the COVID-19 vaccine before frontline doctors and nurses, according to a [recent report by The Guardian](#).

Around two-thirds of general practitioners (GP) have yet to receive the vaccine despite the fact that a new variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, has emerged in the country. The new variant could be associated with faster spread of the disease.

Dr. Richard Vautrey, the chair of the British Medical Association's GP committee, urged the UK government to accelerate the delivery of the vaccine.

"We need millions of doses to be made available as soon as possible – urgently – because it's the number one priority for GP practices, our patients and the nation, especially given the new mutant strain," Vautrey told The Guardian.

"GPs who haven't got it yet are frustrated because they want to be getting on and vaccinating their patients as well. Their frustration is understandable. They want to protect their patients, especially their vulnerable patients, as quickly as possible," Vautrey added.

According to a [report by the Daily Mail](#), the British Medical Association has also expressed concern that access to the vaccine has not been equal across the health service and that doctors and nurses in high-risk roles have been denied early access to the vaccine.

However, despite concerns that high-risk doctors and other NHS staff members are not getting early access to the vaccine, a spokesperson for NHS London did not provide a clear explanation as to why that is the case.

"Hospital hubs are required to vaccinate in line with clear clinical priorities independently set by JCVI [Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization] and agreed by government, so in this first phase that means focusing on patients aged 80 and over as well as care homes, and it does not yet include routine NHS staff vaccination which will be next as more vaccine becomes available in the new year," the unidentified spokesperson [told The Independent](#).

Several nations have already [banned flights from the UK](#) over fears regarding the new strain. Such nations include France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Ireland, Belgium, Canada, India, Pakistan, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, Russia, Jordan and Hong Kong. According to a report by [NPR](#), the new COVID-19 variant in the UK is called B.1.1.7 and has acquired mutations faster than scientists expected. So far, the variant has 17 different mutations

in its genetic code, eight of which are in the spike protein that binds to human cells during infection.

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US DoJ Whistleblowers Urge For Investigation Into Canceled Diversity Programs
by [Mary F.](#)

Diversity and inclusion programs are planned for the DoJ to allow for important conversations regarding race, nationality and gender.

In a [letter](#) obtained by [NPR](#), DoJ whistleblowers urge federal watchdogs and members of Congress to investigate what they say are illegal government directives that forced diversity and inclusion programs planned by the DoJ earlier this year to be canceled for being “divisive propaganda.”

For example, one of the programs would have featured former US Attorney for the District of Columbia Jessie Liu and Regina Lombardo, the head of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, discussing the “gender leadership gap” at the DoJ. Another program would have looked into implicit bias in law enforcement.

“The Diversity Directives signal to all that minorities are not welcome, their positions are not secure, and that discussing systemic injustice is inappropriate in the workplace or otherwise,” David Seide, a lawyer at the Government Accountability Project who is representing the DoJ whistleblowers, told NPR. “The directives were implemented to silence conversations surrounding issues of race, nationality and gender during a time when such conversations have been most needed.”

The latest move comes after US President Donald Trump’s September executive order which required federal agencies to submit diversity training programs to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) before they could begin. According to the White House, the executive order was supposed to “promote economy and efficiency in federal contracting, to promote unity in the federal workforce and to combat offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating.”

Another DoJ employee, who also spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that the OPM, which must now approve diversity programs, is currently dedicating most of its time to protecting the federal workforce in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The whistleblowers are asking the incoming administration of US President-elect Joe Biden to withdraw Trump’s executive order and for congressional agencies to investigate the issue.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the National Urban League and the National Fair Housing Alliance filed a [class-action lawsuit](#) in October against Trump’s executive order, saying it is “chillingly punitive” censorship that violates free speech, equal protection and due process rights, [NPR reported](#).

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New York City Will Enforce Quarantine for UK Travelers to Curb Transmission of New COVID-19 Strain

by [Mary F.](#)

Health experts this week revealed that a new variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, has emerged in the UK. To date, the variant is believed to be more contagious but not more lethal than other COVID-19 strains.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio [confirmed Wednesday](#) that all UK travelers going to New York City will now be required to quarantine for two-weeks or face a daily \$1,000 fine. Travelers coming into the city from the UK will also receive visits from sheriff's deputies to ensure that they are following quarantine guidelines.

"We cannot take chances with anyone who travels, particularly people coming in from the UK," [de Blasio revealed Wednesday](#). "This UK variant news is a real issue. I want to make sure we understand it," he added.

"There's been confusion in some of the stories I've read because it's complicated. [UK Prime Minister] Boris Johnson shut down the UK one week after he said he would never shut it down for Christmas. The reason he shut it down, he said, and did a total 180-degree shift, was because they found a variant of the virus."

Under the new travel guidelines, all traveling coming into New York City, regardless of where they're traveling from, will also have to submit contact information forms to receive orders from the state department of health.

"Filling out a form to let them know that I guess they track your whereabouts. That was easy, too. Only took two minutes on the internet," [one traveler told CBS](#).

"They said we had to fill out a form. Basically, they'll try to reach us if someone tested positive on the line," another added.

The latest guideline also comes after New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said that three airlines, namely Delta, British Airways and Virgin Atlantic, [will now require passengers](#) to have a negative COVID-19 test before boarding flights from the UK to John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City.

The British government on Wednesday also confirmed that a second potentially more infectious variant of the novel coronavirus, first identified in South Africa, has now emerged in the UK.

"Thanks to the impressive genomic capability of the South Africans, we've detected two cases of another new variant of coronavirus here in the UK," British Health Secretary Matt Hancock [told reporters on Wednesday](#).

"This new variant is highly concerning, because it is yet more transmissible, and it appears to have mutated further than the new variant has been discovered in the UK," he said.

More than 40 countries in Europe, Asia, South America, the Caribbean and the Middle East have restricted travel from the UK to curb the transmission of the COVID-19 variant. In addition to the UK, the variant [has also been detected](#) in Denmark, the Netherlands and Australia.

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Twitter Reset - Political Cartoon

During the 2017 transition to the Trump administration, social media giant Twitter allowed the follower counts on several White House-linked accounts to be transferred to the new users untouched. Now, the company is changing its tune.

Doing away with its past procedures, [Twitter announced Tuesday](#) that it would be resetting the follower tallies to zero on all of its White House accounts, such as @WhiteHouse, @POTUS and @VP, ahead of Inauguration Day, much to the chagrin of US President-elect Joe Biden's camp.

Rob Flaherty, the digital director for Biden's presidential campaign, remarked following the revelation that the company had informed the team that the decision "[was unequivocal](#)." While the new policy is a complete change from past practices, Twitter has indicated that it will issue a one-time notification to followers of the specified accounts and give them the choice of whether or not to continue following the accounts under the new administration.

The Biden administration is set to take over the social media accounts on Inauguration Day.

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'Crazy' Trump Will Suffer Similar Fate as Executed Iraqi Leader Saddam Hussein, Says Iran's Rouhani

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Tensions between the US and Iran were heightened when US President Donald Trump decided to withdraw from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and begin reimposing previously lifted economic sanctions against the Middle Eastern country. The pair have remained at odds as Trump has voiced a variety of threats against Iran.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani expressed himself freely on Wednesday and issued a series of heated remarks against Trump, even going so far as to equate the American commander-in-chief to deceased Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

During a Cabinet meeting, Rouhani stated that Trump would likely suffer a fate similar to that of Hussein, who had waged a yearslong war against Iran in the 1980s and was later hanged in 2006 for his role in the [1982 Dujail massacre](#).

"The fate of US President Donald Trump will not be better than Saddam Hussein," Rouhani said in [comments obtained by the Fars News Agency](#). "We had two crazy creatures in history who imposed war on the people. One was Saddam, and the other was Trump."

"Saddam imposed military war, and Trump imposed economic war on us," he continued, before noting that Iran was "united during the war and defeated Saddam." He added, "We also witnessed the day when that madman was executed."

As for the US' sanctions against Iran, Rouhani stated that the country "did not let this economic war reach its goal."

Rouhani's remarks come a handful of weeks before Trump is expected to depart the White House on Inauguration Day, when US President-elect Joe Biden will take the political reins. Iranian officials are hoping that once Biden takes over the Oval Office, the US will rejoin the JCPOA and begin the process of lifting the crippling sanctions that affected Iran's oil sales, imports and financial transactions.

The Iranian president [previously indicated during a televised ceremony](#) that he had "no doubt" that under a Biden presidency, the US would resume its role as a JCPOA signatory. Biden has made it known that he intends to resume talks with Iran, but it is unclear much of a priority the matter will be for the incoming administration.

Ahead of Biden's takeover, tensions between the US and Iran will more than likely reach a new boiling point. Most recently, several of Trump's [defense chiefs gathered at the White House](#) on Wednesday to discuss potential responses to Iran over the [December 20 bombardment of Iraq's Green Zone](#), where the US Embassy is located. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has claimed Iran was involved in the attack. [Trump later took to Twitter](#) to offer some "friendly health advice to Iran" by stating: "If one American is killed, I will hold Iran responsible."

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'Christmas Gift': Families of COVID-19 Dead File Suit Against Italian Officials, Seek \$122 Million by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Italy has become one of the hardest hit European countries, as its death toll recently surpassed 70,000 and its case count nears 2 million. Tracking by Worldometer notes Italy ranks fourth in case count when compared against other European countries.

A total of 500 relatives of individuals who died of [COVID-19](#) in Italy presented a lawsuit on Wednesday against regional and national authorities who they claim are liable for criminal negligence due to their handling of the pandemic.

The civil lawsuit is against Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, Health Minister Roberto Speranza and Attilio Fontana, the governor of the hard-hit Lombardy region. The legal action seeks a total of \$122 million in damages, [Reuters reported](#).

Although the lawsuit focuses on the February decision by officials to reopen a hospital in Lombardy a few hours after a COVID-19 outbreak was detected, the main sticking point of the suit is the alleged absence of an updated national pandemic plan and a failure by regional officials to execute a localized version of that plan.

"These complaints are our Christmas gift to those who should have done what they were supposed to do and did not do while in Italy, on December 25, there will be 70,000 empty chairs," Luca Fusco, president of the advocacy group Noi Denunceremo, which launched the lawsuit, said in a statement.

"With proper planning, as requested over and over again by the EU and WHO [World Health Organization], we are sure there would have been many fewer [deaths]."

Noi Denunceremo, which was established in April to represent the families of those who died in Lombardy's city of Bergamo, have filed hundreds of legal complaints over the last several months that shed light on how some individuals died.

Concerns about Italy's mismanagement of the pandemic recently resurfaced after prosecutors questioned Francesco Zambon, an epidemiologist who co-authored a report on Italy's COVID-19 response that determined the government's handling of the crisis was "improvised, chaotic and creative."

Though the report was published in May by the WHO, it was removed a day later over "factual inaccuracies." However, [Zambon told the Associated Press](#) that he was pressured by Dr. Ranieri Guerra, a senior WHO official, to alter data regarding Italy's plan. Guerra, who was working as liaison with the Italian government at the time, was responsible for updating the country's pandemic plan during his time at the Italian Health Ministry between 2014 and late 2017.

Consuelo Locati, the lawyer heading the lawsuit, [explained to The Guardian for a Tuesday article](#) that "even if [the old plan] was implemented, it wouldn't have worked as it lacked a series of steps that should have been followed in order to have been prepared for this pandemic."

"They had no guidelines," she underscored.

While several Italian regions were devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Lombardy took the brunt of it. According to [data collected by Statista](#), the region has recorded over 24,000 coronavirus-related deaths.

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Trump Vetoes 2021 US Defense Bill, Labeling Measure 'Gift' to China, Russia
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier this month, both houses of the US Congress passed the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) despite threats from US President Donald Trump that he would veto the \$740 billion funding measure.

Trump delivered on his past threats to veto the colossal defense bill on Wednesday, paving the way for the first potential override vote by congressional lawmakers during his presidency. The now-vetoed bill would secure a 3% pay increase for US service members and ensure that defense modernization programs are up and running.

"My administration has taken strong actions to help keep our nation safe and support our service members," [Trump wrote in the veto notification](#). "I will not approve this bill, which would put the interests of the Washington, DC, establishment over those of the American people."

"Unfortunately, the act fails to include critical national security measures, includes provisions that fail to respect our veterans and our military's history, and contradicts efforts by my administration to put America first in our national security and foreign policy actions," Trump added in a statement to Congress.

Without providing specific details, the commander-in-chief also noted that "it is a 'gift' to China and Russia." Trump [previously tweeted](#) on December 13 that the "biggest winner of our new defense bill is China."

Other reasons for the veto included the [renaming of military installations](#) that honored Confederate leaders, a hot topic issue that Trump previously clashed on with former US Defense Secretary Mark Esper when the latter effectively banned the display of the Confederate battle flag at US defense sites.

Earlier this month, Trump also threatened to veto the 4,517-page defense bill if lawmakers failed to include a measure that [eliminated Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act](#), which provides protections to social media companies like Facebook and Twitter from being held liable for posts generated by users.

In the veto notice, Trump decried Congress' decision to not repeal the decades-old piece of legislation, which he said "facilitates the spread of foreign disinformation online." He added that it was a "serious threat to our national security."

The NDAA passed both the US House of Representatives and the US Senate with bipartisan, veto-proof majorities in early December. US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) has specified that the chamber will vote on Monday on whether to override Trump's veto.

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Morocco Urges Biden to 'Preserve' Trump's Recognition of Its Western Sahara Sovereignty Claims

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While all of the recent peace deals between Israel and Muslim nations have come under fire for one reason or another, the most recent accord with Morocco has attracted a bevy of naysayers from the highest echelons of US political circles as well.

"We realistically think the administration will find a good rationale to preserve this," Moroccan Foreign Minister [Nasser Bourita told Axios on Tuesday](#) about US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty claims over Western Sahara.

"We hope the next administration will continue this positive dynamic and nourish what we have built because it was done for peace. What we have here is a package which was signed and the first commitment that everyone made was to defend, promote and upgrade this package," he noted.

According to Axios' Barak Ravid, who reported from a trilateral US-Israel-Morocco summit in Rabat to finalize the political normalization process, Jerusalem fears that if US President-elect Joe Biden reverses the recognition move, "the rest of the deal could fall apart."

[Haaretz reported on Tuesday that](#) Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi has cast the normalization deal with Morocco as part of the Abraham Accords that saw the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar and Sudan sign peace agreements with Israel. When US President Donald Trump announced the deal on Twitter on December 10, he framed it in much the same way.

However, that's not how things appear to Rabat, which has [long maintained underground connections to](#) the Israeli government as well as engaged in high-level negotiations.

"We were pioneers of the relations with Israel. For us, it is a big event, but we are not building from scratch. ... It is about renewing the traditional contacts and building something which is lasting," Bourita told Axios. "Everything is normal now - we do not plan to go only halfway here." The Polisario Front, which is recognized by the United Nations as the legitimate representative of the Saharawi people who are native to Western Sahara, has also urged Biden to rethink the decision.

"It is not part of Trump's real estate to give to Morocco, he could have given them one of his golf properties, not Western Sahara," Kamal Fadel, who represents the Polisario Front in Australia and New Zealand, [told Radio France International on Saturday](#). "We are hopeful that US President-elect Joe Biden, who I understand as a man of integrity and very familiar with the legacy of colonialism in Africa, that he will have a positive influence on self-determination in Western Sahara and would reverse this decision."

The UN promised in 1991 to hold an independence referendum in the territory after Polisario fought Morocco to a standstill. The group declared a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in Western Sahara in 1976, just months after Morocco occupied the territory on the heels of departing Spanish colonial forces.

Widespread Internal Dissent at Trump Deal

However, Trump's move hasn't just been criticized by the Saharawis: leading US diplomatic figures have similarly railed against the decision.

[The day the deal was announced](#), [Sen. James Inhofe](#) (R-OK), one of the most conservative members of Congress and the present chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, blasted Trump for "trading away the rights of a voiceless people."

Trump's own former national security adviser, John Bolton, who is known for his hawkish neoconservative politics, urged Trump not to throw away "decades of carefully crafted US policy" [in a December 15 op-ed in Foreign Policy](#).

"In making his rash decision, Trump consulted neither the Polisario Front - which has long represented the Sahrawis - nor Algeria and Mauritania, the most concerned neighboring countries, nor anyone else," Bolton wrote. "This is what happens when dilettantes handle US diplomacy, and it is sadly typical of Trump's nakedly transactional approach during his tenure." Two days later, James Baker, who served as US secretary of state between 1989 and 1992 under then-President George H.W. Bush, and later as the UN secretary-general's envoy to Western Sahara from 1997 until 2004, attacked the deal as a "cynical decision" that endangered the entire Abraham Accords mission [in his own op-ed in the Washington Post](#). He also noted the regional effects, [from pushing Algeria further away from the US](#) to creating a new conflict zone in which Daesh's* West Africa franchise could find room to flourish, would be almost universally harmful to US policy.

*Daesh (also known as ISIS/ISIL/IS) is a terrorist organization outlawed in Russia and many other states.

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Mauritania Claims Troops Fired on by Morocco in Western Sahara Border Skirmish Day After Joint Talks

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The day before, the two nations' leaders had met to discuss enhanced military cooperation as Morocco faces a renewed challenge to its territorial claims over Western Sahara. However, Mauritania has long recognized the indigenous Polisario's Front's claim on the land.

[According to a Wednesday statement](#) by the Mauritanian National Army, some of its troops came under fire on Tuesday night as they approached a defensive position occupied by the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces. The Mauritanian troops had been chasing a group of smugglers north of the village of Inal, a town near the Mauritania-Western Sahara border about 125 miles east of Guerguerat.

The two forces established communication, and the incident ended before anyone on either side was injured. Morocco has not yet publicly acknowledged the incident.

Ironically, the episode happened just a day after Mauritania and Morocco held a joint military commission in Nouakchott.

[According to a Mauritanian news release](#), the meeting "dealt with the existing cooperation relations between the armies of the two brotherly countries, especially in the field of defense and security, and the means for their future development."

[Asharq Al-Awsat reported the meeting](#) was provoked by the recent display of force at the Guerguerat border crossing. On November 13, Moroccan troops forcefully dispersed a Saharawi protest encampment that had occupied the road into Mauritania [for weeks. Sputnik reported at the time](#). The protesters were demanding the United Nations add a human rights monitoring component to its mission in Western Sahara, MINURSO, and move toward holding the long-promised independence referendum for Western Sahara.

The territory has been claimed and partially occupied by Morocco since 1975 - claims US President Donald Trump moved to recognize earlier this month in exchange for [Rabat's normalization of relations with Israel](#). Mauritania also briefly claimed the southern half of Western Sahara, but signed a peace treaty with the newly declared Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in 1979 and pulled out of the country.

The violent dispersal prompted the Saharawi Polisario Front to declare the 29-year peace deal with Morocco to be void, and [the Saharawi Army moved to begin new military operations](#) against the massive sand wall built by Morocco to isolate Polisario in the country's east.

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Video Purporting to Capture Los Angeles' Infamous 'Jetpack Man' Flying Near Plane Emerges Online

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The year 2020 has seen mysterious triangular columns appear around the globe and the Pentagon reportedly open a probe into a growing number of UFO sightings, but film of a man in a jetpack zipping around airplanes thousands of feet in the air is something new.

After months of mystery, a pilot has finally captured video of what appears to be the famous "jetpack man" reported by several airline crews on final approach to Los Angeles International Airport.

[According to The War Zone, the video was recorded](#) during an instructional flight from California's Sling Pilot Academy out over the Pacific Ocean between Palos Verdes and the Catalina Islands.

In the video posted to Instagram on Tuesday, an object that appears to be a man wearing a jetpack is spotted off the aircraft's starboard side. According to The War Zone, the plane was flying at an altitude of about 3,000 feet.

However, the outlet noted that jetpacks typically have very short ranges, making it very unlikely that one could make it so far off the coast and at such an altitude. Instead, they suggested it might be a drone dressed up to look like a man wearing a jetpack. However, that raises new questions, like: why would such a stunt be performed over the ocean instead of a populated area where people could see it?

["Jetpack man" was first reported in late August](#) by pilots in two separate aircraft on approach to Los Angeles International Airport. In that incident, the man was also spotted at roughly 3,000 feet in altitude. [He was spotted a second time in mid-October](#) in reports that mirrored the first incident. Sputnik reported the FBI had opened a file on "jetpack man," but little else was known about the probe or the mysterious would-be Rocketeer.

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US Defense Chiefs to Give Trump Response Options to Iran After Baghdad Embassy Attack - Report

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has claimed Iran is responsible for the December 20 bombardment of the Green Zone in Baghdad, Tehran has strongly denied involvement. Similar claims were made a year ago, just days before the US assassinated Iranian Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani outside Baghdad.

According to a senior US administration official, US President Donald Trump was joined by defense leaders at the White House on Wednesday to discuss possible responses to an attack against the US embassy in Baghdad on Sunday.

The meeting reportedly included Pompeo, acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller, White House national security adviser Robert O'Brien, and other top defense officials. They intend to offer "a range of options" to Trump to deter attacks against US personnel by Iran or by militias in Iraq that are sympathetic to Iran.

The Sunday bombardment of the Green Zone, a fortified area in central Baghdad that houses the US embassy, managed to penetrate US anti-missile defenses [and do "minor damage" to the embassy compound](#). An Iraqi civilian was killed, and several others were injured.

Iraqi Prime Minister [Mustafa Al-Kadhimi denounced the attack, saying on Monday](#) that a round of arrests prevented a second attack from being carried out, although he named no groups allegedly responsible for the first attack. However, Pompeo firmly [pointed the finger at "Iran-backed militias."](#)

Tehran has denied involvement in the attack. "The US military presence is the source of instability in our region. No amount of spin can divert blame for its evils," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Twitter on Monday](#).

The US made similar claims this time last year after the US blamed Kata'ib Hezbollah, a Shiite militia in Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, [for a December 27, 2019, attack on an Iraqi base in Kirkuk](#) that killed a US contractor and injured four US service members and two Iraqi service members. When the US launched an airstrike on Kata'ib Hezbollah positions the next day, mass protests [descended on the US embassy and set fire to some](#) of its outer structures, and Washington blamed Tehran for instigating those attacks as well.

Just days later, [the US assassinated Soleimani outside Baghdad airport](#) alongside Kata'ib Hezbollah's commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. With the anniversary of Soleimani's killing approaching, Gen. Kenneth "Frank" McKenzie, head of US Central Command, warned that US troops and diplomatic [staff in Iraq face "heightened risk" of retaliatory attack](#).

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Trump Pardons Paul Manafort, Roger Stone and Jared's Father, Charles Kushner by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US President Donald Trump has already pardoned two other figures implicated in the Russiagate scandal and a slew of Republican allies, as well as four Blackwater mercenaries convicted of massacring civilians in Iraq in 2007.

In his latest round of presidential pardons, US President Donald Trump has pardoned former 2016 campaign figures Paul Manafort and Roger Stone, as well as Charles Kushner, a real estate developer and father to his son-in-law, Jared Kushner.

Manafort, a political consultant, chaired Trump's campaign team from June to August 2016. He later became a person of interest in the Russiagate probe and was convicted of a slew of financial crimes related to money from his political consulting in Ukraine. However, his sentence was increased after he was found in violation of his plea deal by lying to federal investigators. In May, he was released into home detention due to COVID-19 concerns.

Stone, who served as an informal adviser to Trump's campaign but falsely presented himself as a go-between for the campaign and WikiLeaks, previously had his sentence commuted by Trump in July. Stone was convicted of lying to Congress about his purported conversations with WikiLeaks and its co-founder, Julian Assange, as well as for having coached comedian Randy Credico before Credico's own congressional testimony on the subject.

Kushner, however, was never part of the Trump campaign. The father-in-law of Trump's daughter, Ivanka, Kushner served 24 months in 2005 and 2006 for illegal campaign contributions, tax evasion, and witness tampering. The convictions caused him to be disbarred in New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, preventing him from practicing law. [According to Politico, he donated \\$100,000](#) to Trump's Make American Great Again PAC in 2015. On Tuesday, [Trump also pardoned another figure from](#) his 2016 presidential campaign: George Papadopoulos, a foreign policy adviser who featured prominently in the Russiagate investigation and later pleaded guilty to lying to federal investigators about his interaction with a mysterious Maltese professor named Josef Mifsud. Another, Alex van der Zwaan, was convicted as part of the Russiagate investigation for lying to the FBI during its investigation of Manafort, for which he served 30 days in prison and was fined \$20,000, being subsequently deported to the Netherlands after finishing his sentence.

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Trump Threatens Iran, Tweets Rocket Photos Claiming to Prove Complicity in Baghdad Embassy Attack
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Trump administration has long claimed attacks against US forces in Iraq and across the Middle East are orchestrated by Iran, but it has consistently failed to present damning evidence of the claim.

US President Donald Trump claimed in a Wednesday tweet that Iran was responsible for the December 20 attack on the US Embassy in Baghdad and threatened to “hold Iran responsible” if any Americans are killed in subsequent attacks.

“Some friendly health advice to Iran: If one American is killed, I will hold Iran responsible,” Trump added. “Think it over.”

Along with the threatening message, Trump tweeted a photo of three small rockets he claimed had failed to launch and pointed the finger at Iran.

The image shows several 107-millimeter rockets that puzzlingly bear English-language labels. The image is also not inherently indicative of Iranian involvement.

The rocket comes from a Type 63 multiple rocket launcher introduced by China in the 1960s.

The portable launcher, which looks a bit like a mortar on wheels with 12 launch tubes, [has been sold to dozens of countries](#), including Iran but also Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Azerbaijan, the Palestine Liberation Organization, Afghanistan Libya, Egypt, Turkey and Sudan, just in the Middle East alone, and has been recorded as being used by Daesh, Iraqi Kurdish forces and the Popular Mobilization Units.

In other words, the rockets could have come from anywhere.

The claim is similar to one leveled against Iran in June 2019, in which a US drone being shot down over Yemen was presented [as evidence the Houthis were being armed by Iran](#). US Central Command claimed the weapon used was an SA-6 surface-to-air missile (SAM), which is the NATO reporting name for the Soviet-built 2K12 Kub tracked mobile SAM system.

Like the Chinese Type 63 rocket launcher, the 2K12 has been around for half a century, been sold to dozens of countries and used in even more conflicts, meaning its appearance doesn't reveal an ostensible Iranian hand at work.

The claim that Iran funnels weapons to guerrilla fighters and terrorist groups has been used by the Trump administration ramp up its attacks on Iran, [designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) a terrorist organization and assassinating one of its leaders, [Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, who commanded](#) the IRGC's elite Quds Force and led the fight against Daesh in Iraq.

Earlier on Wednesday, senior defense leaders including US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, US national security adviser Robert O'Brien and acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller [met at the White House to decide on "a range of options"](#) to present to Trump as a response to the Sunday bombardment of the Green Zone, which did minor damage to a structure and killed an Iraqi civilian.

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UK Officials Raise Alarm Over Potential Funding Cuts to Research on Deadly Diseases
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab previously acknowledged in November that economic hardship dealt by the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the government to pull back on its monetary assistance for certain programs, but pledged to prioritize measures that would help combat the deadly respiratory disease.

Several officials with ties to the UK government recently addressed a letter to Raab, seeking assurances that looming cuts to the UK aid budget would not cause investment setbacks for programs helping to address deadly diseases.

The letter, which was [obtained for an exclusive report by The Guardian](#), notes that officials are growing increasingly concerned about the potential "dramatic reductions" in funding that may impede research on diseases such as malaria or tuberculosis.

"We're not just speculating on these cuts," the letter said. "This is on the basis of concerns that have been raised to us by either scientists or those involved in research programs."

"We're not criticizing the government for something it has not yet done – we're warning that it should not do this, and that it would be inconsistent with the priorities it itself has set out, and with all the learning from COVID."

The Guardian notes that the letter was written by Tory House of Lords member Nick Herbert, former Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt, chair of the science and technology select committee Greg Clark and Sarah Champion, who serves as the chair of the international development committee.

Signers of the letter were reportedly particularly worried about the funding that is provided to international product development partnerships (PDP), which make up the bulk of investments for disease-related research and development. While the majority of PDP contracts are set to

expire in March 2021, The Guardian determined that at least two contractors received “signals” from government officials that funding would be delayed.

Although a government spokesperson did not elaborate on the budget, they did inform the outlet that the government would be spending over \$13 billion “next year to fight poverty, tackle climate change and improve global health.”

In mid-November, reports emerged that [budget cuts would see billions of dollars in aid slashed](#) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's economic fallout.

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Servers Could Be Required to Share Tips Under New DoL Regulation
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The final rule addresses amendments to the US Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 (CAA), which previously protected wait staffers' tips from being taken by those in management or supervisor positions.

The US Department of Labor announced a final rule on Tuesday geared toward "protecting the tips of employees," [according to a news release](#).

“This final rule provides clarity and flexibility for employers and could increase pay for back-of-the house workers, like cooks and dishwashers, who have been excluded from participating in tip pools in the past,” wrote Cheryl Stanton, the Labor Department’s wage and hour administrator.

“Newly allowed tip sharing may incentivize the inclusion of these previously excluded workers and reduce wage disparities among all workers who contribute to customers’ experience.”

It is customary for US restaurant customers to leave their waiter a tip totaling 20% of the pretax total of a bill.

"The CAA prohibits employers from keeping tips received by their employees, regardless of whether the employer takes a credit for tips earned by workers toward its minimum wage obligation to those employees under the FLSA," the Tuesday release noted. "The rule also prohibits employers from allowing managers or supervisors to keep any portion of employees’ tips."

The move comes as the conclusion to a more than three-year battle after the Trump administration's Labor Department published a [Notice of Proposed Rulemaking](#) "which proposed to rescind the parts of its tip regulations that applied to employers that pay a direct cash wage of at least the full federal minimum wage and do not take a tip credit."

Heidi Shierholz, the director of policy at the Economic Policy Institute and an Obama-era Labor Department economist, [told the Wall Street Journal](#) that the new law "will allow employers to shift work from non-tipped to tipped workers."

In turn, the restaurant owner could end up paying less wages out-of-pocket.

Shierholz argued that there were other avenues for the Trump administration to take if it truly wanted to address wage inequality. “If the administration wanted to raise pay for

back-of-the-house workers, they could have supported a minimum-wage increase,” she said, referring to the federal minimum wage.

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GOP Lawmakers Rally Behind Trump Ahead of Jan. 6 Electoral College Vote Certification
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) has congratulated President-elect Joe Biden on his Electoral College victory and more recently vowed to bring all of the president-elect's Cabinet nominees to the Senate floor for a full chamber vote.

While Rep. [Mo Brooks \(R-AL\)](#) and Sen.-elect [Tommy Tuberville \(R-AL\)](#) were initially predicted to be the only GOP members to vote against the Electoral College results on January 6, a number of Republican lawmakers have joined the ranks, including Rep.-elect Madison Cawthorn (R-NC).

“I have a message for all other Republicans across the country,” Cawthorn said in a video message to the American people.

“If you are not on the record calling for fair, free and just elections now and in the future, I will come to your district and I will fund a primary opponent against you.”

According to the lawmaker's social media post, his contesting of the election is tied to so-called “constitutional violations by key states.”

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

Rep. Jody Hice (R-GA) and more than dozen other lawmakers met with Brooks and US President Donald Trump to discuss the upcoming January 6 congressional meeting that will be [presided over by Vice President Mike Pence](#).

“I will lead an objection to Georgia's electors on Jan 6,” Hice tweeted on Saturday.

Reps. [Brian Babin \(R-TX\)](#) and [Ted Budd \(R-NC\)](#) have also publicly expressed their objection to the Electoral College vote certification. Some 20 Republicans have signed Babin's letter to congressional leadership demanding they investigate the US president's allegations of nationwide voter fraud.

This new support comes days after McConnell took to the Senate floor and [congratulated Biden](#) on his Electoral College victory. The Senate majority leader [recently argued](#) that he would be treating Biden “a hell of a lot better” than Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) “ever treated” Trump.

“They [Biden's nominees] aren't all going to pass on a voice vote, and they aren't all going to make it, but I will put them on the floor,” McConnell [told the Louisville Courier-Journal](#) in an article published Monday.

“I think the American people expect us to look for areas of agreement in a divided system while setting aside for debate the things we don't agree on.”

President Trump has repeatedly claimed that the election win was "stolen" from him via mass fraud and irregularities. However, he said that if the Electoral College votes for Biden as the next US president, he will "certainly" vacate the White House.

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US Urban Anti-Violent Crime Operation Led to Over 6,000 Arrests - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department's urban anti-violent crime operation, known as Operation Legend, has led to more than 6,000 arrests in less than six months, Attorney General William Barr said in a press release.

"Since Operation Legend's launch on July 8, 2020, over 6,000 arrests – including approximately 467 for homicide – were made; more than 2600 firearms were seized; and more than 32 kilos of heroin, more than 17 kilos of fentanyl, more than 300 kilos of methamphetamine, more than 135 kilos of cocaine, and more than \$11 million in drug and other illicit proceeds were seized," the release said on Wednesday.

Of the 6,000 arrests, about 1,500 have already been charged with federal offenses, the release said.

Barr concluded his last day as Attorney General on Wednesday.

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Trump Pardons Ex-Campaign Manager Manafort, Kushner's Father

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump has granted a full pardon to his former campaign manager Paul Manafort, the White House said in a press release.

"Today, President Trump has issued a full and complete pardon to Paul Manafort, stemming from convictions prosecuted in the course of Special Counsel [Robert] Mueller's investigation, which was premised on the Russian collusion hoax," the release said on Wednesday.

Trump also issued full pardons to his former aide Roger Stone and his son-in-law's father Charles Kushner, who was convicted of preparing false tax returns, witness retaliation, and making false statements to the Federal Elections Commission.

In recent days and weeks, the president also granted pardons to other individuals convicted in the Mueller probe, including former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and former aide George Papadopoulos.

On Tuesday, Trump also granted pardons to four former Blackwater contractors convicted in connection with the death of Iraqi civilians in 2007. He also pardoned former Republican Congressmen Chris Collins and Duncan Hunter, who each pleaded guilty to fraud charges.

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Trump Pardons Ex-Campaign Manager Manafort - White House

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Over 15Mln COVID-19 Vaccines Doses Shipped Across US for Immunization Campaign - Official

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US authorities have shipped 15.5 million doses of coronavirus vaccines across the United States with up to 5 million more slated for delivery before year end, Gen. Gustave Perna, who is in charge of the distribution campaign, told reporters.

"To date, we have allocated 15.5 million doses of vaccine and we are on track to allocate another 4.5 to 5 million next week which will bring us to 20 million doses of vaccine allocated to America before the end of the year," Perna said during a press briefing.

The United States has authorized two vaccines - produced by Pfizer and Moderna - for an ongoing mass immunization. Each vaccine is administered in two shots with an interval of several weeks required between injections. The Defense Department is in charge of the vaccines' distribution as part of the Trump administration's Operation Warp Speed.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced earlier that at least 1 million Americans received their first doses of the vaccine as of Wednesday morning.

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US Achieves Important Milestone With COVID-19 Vaccinations Topping 1Mln - Health Director

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - More than 1 million Americans received the first of two doses of the coronavirus vaccine, surpassing a key hurdle in bringing the pandemic under control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Robert Redfield said in a press release.

"The United States achieved an early but important milestone today – jurisdictions have now reported that more than 1 million people have received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine since administration began ten days ago," Redfield said on Wednesday.

At the same time, Redfield urged Americans to "embrace proven health strategies" such as wearing face masks until the vaccine become available to everyone.

By the end of this week, US officials expect to have distributed nearly 10 million doses of two approved vaccines, with hundreds of millions of doses on order from developers Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna.

Each vaccine requires an initial shot followed by a booster shot several weeks later.

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Ivanka Trump Put US Government Budget in Limbo Over Rejected 'Pet Project' - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The White House threatened to veto the 2021 Omnibus spending bill over a demand from Ivanka Trump that her women's empowerment program be included in the State Department's budget, US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Eliot Engel said in a press release.

"Earlier this week, Congress passed the Omnibus spending bill, but without the key bipartisan State Department Authorization Act," Engel said on Wednesday. "At the last minute, Ivanka Trump demanded that her self-styled women's economic empowerment program be 'airdropped' into the measure."

Engel said Ivanka Trump's Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative had virtually no support in Congress, but the White House threatened to veto the Omnibus bill if it contained "the bipartisan, bicameral State Department Authorization Act without this pet project."

The threat prompted lawmakers to remove the State Department budget from the Omnibus bill, which has now been approved by both the House and Senate.

White House spokesman Judd Deere responded by calling Engel's remarks a "shameful" endorsement of legal barriers to female participation in the global economy.

"The fact that Congressman Engel refers to an initiative affecting millions of women around the world as a 'pet project' says more about him than it does about Ivanka Trump," Deere said in a statement.

Deere also accused congressional Democrats with reneging at the last minute on an agreement to include the project in the 2021 State Department budget due to animus against outgoing President Donald Trump.

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Trump Calls on Iran to 'Think Over' Any Possible Attack on Americans in Iraq

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump warned that the United States would hold Iran responsible if any Americans are killed in any new rocket attacks in Iraq. "Our embassy in Baghdad got hit Sunday by several rockets. Three rockets failed to launch. Guess where they were from: IRAN. Now we hear chatter of additional attacks against Americans in Iraq," Trump said via Twitter on Wednesday. "Some friendly health advice to Iran: If one American is killed, I will hold Iran responsible. Think it over."

US officials said earlier that they see troubling indicators of "potential attack preparations" from pro-Iran militias in Iraq ahead of the first anniversary of the assassination of Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani by a US drone strike outside Baghdad.

Earlier on Wednesday, US media reported citing unnamed sources that the United States may close its embassy in Iraq to pave the way for an possible attack on Iran.

The most recent rocket attack took place on Sunday, when defensive interceptors stationed at the US embassy shot down three rockets fired at Baghdad's Green Zone, a heavily fortified enclave where many government offices and diplomatic missions are located.

The United States has already withdrawn some of its diplomats from Iraq to reduce exposure to possible Iranian attacks.

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US Attorney Agrees to Investigate Fatal Police Shooting in Ohio After Local Probe Ends

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Federal prosecutors will examine the case of an unarmed African-American man killed in a Tuesday morning encounter with police in Columbus, Ohio, US Attorney David DeVillers said in a press release.

"The mayor requested that the US Attorney's Office review the investigation for possible federal civil rights violations, and after consulting with Ohio Attorney General Yost, I agreed that my office will review the case as requested once BCI's investigation is complete. This office will then consult with the Franklin County Prosecutor's Office on how to proceed at the conclusion of our review," DeVillers said on Wednesday.

The Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation was immediately notified of the shooting and began an investigation, a policy with all shooting involving the Columbus police department, DeVillers added.

Andre Hill, 47, was shot and killed by officer Adam Coy, who has since been relieved of duty pending the outcome investigations, local media reported.

Coy, an officer with a history of excessive-force complaints, shot Hill as officers responded to a non-emergency disturbance complaint from a neighbor at 1:37 a.m. on Tuesday, according to media reports.

On Tuesday, Mayor Andrew Ginther said neither Coy nor another officer who responded - but did not fire a weapon - turned on their body cameras until after the shooting had occurred, the reports said.

The body cameras have a 60-second "look-back" feature that captures video, but not audio, which was released on Wednesday.

The footage showed a Black man emerging from a garage holding up a cellphone seconds before he is fatally shot. The video also appears to show that officers delayed giving medical aid to the man following the shooting, the city said in statement, as quoted in the reports.

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US to Provide \$18Mln in Aid to Assist Refugees Fleeing Conflict in Tigray - Pompeo

UNITED NATIONS, December 23(Sputnik) - The United States will allocate more than \$18 million in humanitarian aid to help address the needs of refugees fleeing the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement. "The United States is providing more than \$18 million in assistance to respond to the growing humanitarian needs caused by conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region," Pompeo said on Wednesday. The resources will boost aid agencies' humanitarian protection, shelter, essential healthcare, emergency food, education, water and hygiene services to more than 52,000 new refugees in Sudan and displaced people in Ethiopia, with possible needs being assessed in Djibouti. Pompeo called on the Ethiopian government to allow immediate and full access for humanitarian organizations to provide support to all conflict-affected people in Tigray, and condemned the killing of aid workers, as well as the looting of relief supplies there. Pompeo further reiterated the United States' concern about the safety of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and called on the government to protect all refugees in the country.

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Trump Vetoes Defense Budget, Calling It 'Gift' to China, Russia - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said he refused to sign the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) because it is a gift to China and Russia.

"I am returning, without my approval, H.R. 6395, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021," Trump said in a notice to the US House of Representatives on Wednesday.

"Unfortunately, the Act fails to include critical national security measures, includes provisions that fail to respect our veterans and our military's history, and contradicts efforts by my Administration to put America first in our national security and foreign policy actions.

Although he recognizes the importance of the NDAA to national security, Trump said the 2021 defense budget in its current form is a "gift" to China and Russia.

The president also blasted lawmakers for failing to terminate parts of the Communications Decency Act, which provides legal protections for social media companies, saying it represents serious threats for national security.

The NDAA also restricts the executive branch's ability to reduce US involvement in wars, he added.

"Numerous provisions of the Act directly contradict my Administration's foreign policy, particularly my efforts to bring our troops home," Trump said. "I oppose endless wars, as does the American public. Over bipartisan objections, however, this Act purports to restrict the President's ability to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, Germany, and South Korea."

Trump said as the country's "Commander in Chief" he has executive power to determine how many troops should stay abroad.

"The Congress may not arrogate this authority to itself directly or indirectly as purported spending restrictions," he said.

NDAA has several other provisions that faced Trump's criticism, including renaming of certain military installations and limiting the amount of military construction funds.

"For all of these reasons, I cannot support this bill," he said. "I will not approve this bill, which would put the interests of the Washington, DC establishment over those of the American people. It is my duty to return H.R. 6395 to the House of Representatives without my approval." The US House will hold an override vote on December 28 and the Senate the following day, the leaders of both chambers said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) -

NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST BELARUS

* The United States has imposed sanctions on Belarus' Deputy Interior Minister Gennady Kazakevich and four entities, including the country's Central Election Commission, as well as on

special law enforcement units over their conduct in the presidential elections and the crackdown on opposition protesters, the US Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

* The United States has imposed visa restrictions on 39 individuals for undermining democracy in Belarus, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

EU-UK TRADE DEAL

* Talks on reaching a UK-EU trade deal are still ongoing and are likely to be finalized on Wednesday evening, a BBC reported.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin said he does not think the change of leadership in the United States will be as usual and is necessary to foresee and accordingly organize work in the economy and in the defense sphere.

* Russia will respond to the new US sanctions, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said as he slammed the latest measures as unfair competition in gross violation of rules of the World Trade Organization.

* The Kremlin is not planning any contacts with the administration of US President-elect Joe Biden yet, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* US sanctions undermine credibility of US dollar as a savings and payment tool, which could weaken it over the years, deputy chair of the Bank of Russia, Alexey Zabotkin, said.

SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS

* Militants of the Jabhat al-Nusra terrorist group (banned in Russia) have carried out 37 shelling attacks in Syria's Idlib deescalation zone over the last 24 hours, Rear Adm. Vyacheslav Sytnik, the deputy head of the Russian Defense Ministry's center for Syrian reconciliation, said on Wednesday.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed hope that the Syrian Constitutional Committee will begin substantive work on the constitution during its next meeting in January.

VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

* The US Embassy in the Central African Republic (CAR) announced on Wednesday that it has issued an immediate shelter in place notice for its employees amid reports of nationwide violence and fears of an opposition's offensive on the capital Bangui.

* French President Emmanuel Macron held phone talks with his CAR counterpart Faustin-Archange Touadera during which he condemned the attempts by armed groups and some politicians to disrupt the upcoming elections, the Elysee Palace said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* Pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and BioNTech announced on Wednesday that they would deliver extra 100 millions doses of their coronavirus vaccine to the United States.

* Russia's health ministry has approved changing the format of post-registration clinical trials of the Sputnik V vaccine: volunteers will no longer get a placebo, only the real vaccine, since it has already proven to be safe, Alexander Gintsburg, the head of the Gamaleya research institute that developed the vaccine, told Sputnik.

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US May Close Embassy in Iraq in Prelude to Attacking Iran - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States may close its embassy in Iraq to pave the way for an attack on Iran, Axios website reported on Wednesday citing two unnamed sources familiar with the discussions.

US officials earlier said that they are seeing troubling indicators of "potential attack preparations" from pro-Iran militias in Iraq ahead ahead of the first anniversary of Qassem Soleimani's assassination. An Iranian commander was killed in a US drone strike outside Baghdad in January.

The move, which is among several options being considered, could be a prelude to retaliation against Iran, the report said.

The latest attack occurred on Sunday, when defensive interceptors stationed at the embassy shot down three rockets fired at the Green Zone, a heavily fortified enclave in Baghdad where many government offices and diplomatic missions are located.

The US earlier withdrew some of its diplomats from Iraq to reduce exposure to possible Iranian attacks.

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Trump also said the budget is a "gift" to China and Russia.

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Canada to Get 250,000 Doses of Pfizer Vaccine in January - Truedau

TORONTO, December 23 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has bought a quarter of a million doses of the Pfizer vaccine against the coronavirus and expects to have them all delivered before the end of next month, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told a news conference on Wednesday.

"We will be receiving 250,000 doses [of the new vaccine] from Pfizer next month," Trudeau told reporters. "We are on track to have 1.5 million doses from both [the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines] delivered by January 31.

Earlier on Wednesday, Health Canada announced that the Canadian government had approved the Moderna vaccine as safe to be administered, Trudeau noted.

"Health Canada has approved the vaccine ...[and] the first doses of our guaranteed 40 million dose order from Moderna will arrive in the coming days. ..."Between the early doses we have already received, and the shipments now scheduled, we're on track to have at least 1.2 million doses from both Pfizer and Moderna delivered by January 31," he said.

The Moderna vaccine needs to be stored at regular freezer temperatures, but not the ultra-cold required to safely store the Pfizer-BioNTech one. That means the Moderna vaccine will be distributed to Canada's remote, outlying communities, Health Canada said.

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Canada Extends Ban on Flights From UK Until January 6 - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Canada is extending its ban on all passenger flights from the United Kingdom for another two weeks to prevent the spread of a new strand of COVID-19, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told an Ottawa press conference on Wednesday.

"We will extend this temporary suspension of passenger flights from the United Kingdom to Canada for another two weeks to January 6," Trudeau said.

On Saturday, UK health officials announced that the country had identified a new variant of the coronavirus that is 70 percent more transmissible than previous strains.

Trudeau said the situation is "serious" and called on all Canadians to abstain from overseas travel over the Christmas and New Year holidays because of the continuing pandemic.

The original temporary ban was imposed at midnight on Sunday.

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Ivanka Trump Put US Government Budget in Limbo Over Rejected 'Pet Project' – Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The White House threatened to veto the 2021 omnibus spending bill over a demand from Ivanka Trump that her women's empowerment program be included in the State Department's budget, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Eliot Engel charged in a press release on Wednesday.

"Earlier this week, Congress passed the Omnibus spending bill, but without the key bipartisan State Department Authorization Act," Engel said. "At the last minute, Ivanka Trump demanded that her self-styled women's economic empowerment program be 'airdropped' into the measure."

Engel said the empowerment program had virtually no support in Congress, but that the White House threatened to veto the Omnibus if it contained "the bipartisan, bicameral State Department Authorization Act without this pet project." The threat prompted lawmakers to remove the State Department budget from the Omnibus, which has now been approved by both the House and Senate.

Even without the State Department budget, President Donald Trump threatens to veto the omnibus, which also contains a COVID-19 relief bill that includes a \$600 payment to eligible Americans. Trump wants the amount raised to \$2,000.

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US Authorizes Wind-Down Transactions With GAZ Group Until January 26, 2022 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has authorized a wind-down period for transactions with the Russian automotive conglomerate GAZ Group until January 26, 2022, the US Treasury Department said in a notice on Wednesday.

"[A]ll transactions and activities otherwise prohibited by the Ukraine Related Sanctions Regulations, 31 C.F.R. part 589, that are ordinarily incident and necessary (1) to divest or transfer debt, equity, or other holdings in GAZ Group to a non-US person, or (2) to facilitate the transfer of debt, equity, or other holdings in GAZ Group by a non-US person to another non-US person, are authorized through 12:01 a.m. eastern standard time, January 26, 2022," the letter said.

The general license does not authorize unblocking of certain property and specific kinds of transactions between US persons and the GAZ Group. The previous deadline for cutting ties with the GAZ Group was January 22, 2021.

The United States imposed sanctions on the GAZ Group last April, but has since issued several general licenses allowing US investors to continue conducting limited transactions with the Russian auto-maker.

The GAZ Group is part of Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska's business empire. The United States targeted the automaker along with Deripaska's companies Rusal and EN+ Group over what Washington has described as Russia's "malign activities" in Ukraine.

In January 2019, the US Treasury Department lifted the sanctions on EN+ and Rusal.

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US Authorizes Transactions With Venezuela's PDVSA Through July 21, 2021 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US government has issued a license authorizing transactions with Venezuela's state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) until June 21, 2021, the Department of the Treasury said in a notice on Wednesday.

"Except as provided in paragraph (b) of this general license, on or after July 21, 2021, all transactions related to, the provision of financing for, and other dealings in the Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A. 2020 8.5 Percent Bond that would be prohibited by ... Executive Order 13835 of May 21, 2018 ... are authorized," the notice said.

This general license does not authorize any transactions or activities prohibited by other documents, the notice added.

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Twelve US States Join Challenge Against Construction of Keystone XL Pipeline - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Twelve US states joined the legal fight to halt the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline over violations of wildlife and endangered species protections, court documents revealed on Wednesday.

"This case concerns the legality of the Army Corps of Engineers' reauthorization of... construction of electrical lines, pipelines, and utility projects resulting in encroachments on wetlands and other waters of the United States," the document said.

The legal challenge said the permit was approved without consulting federal wildlife agencies about the environmental impact of the construction in violation of the Endangered Species Act. The amicus brief, filed with the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, was in support of a legal challenge by environmentalists led by The Northern Plains Resource Council, an American grassroots conservation group.

Earlier this year, a federal court ruled that the Army Corps violated the Endangered Species Act and vacated the permit that allows expedited construction. The pipeline company has appealed the decision to the Ninth Circuit Court.

Keystone is an oil pipeline system that moves a crude oil from the Canadian province of Alberta to the US states of Illinois, Oklahoma and Texas. The first three phases of the system are currently operational, however, the construction of the fourth phase, better known as Keystone XL, which is planned to transport oil to Nebraska, has become a partisan political issue in the United States.

The Obama administration blocked the pipeline project for eight years. The Trump administration authorized construction while the campaign of presumed President-elect Joe Biden announced plans to halt the project.

In September, US Supreme Court rejected a request from the Trump administration and TC Energy to dismiss a lower court ruling blocking further construction of the pipeline because of a violation related to a water-crossing permit.

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US Authorizes Wind-Down Transactions With GAZ Group Until January 26, 2022 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has authorized a wind-down period for transactions with the Russian automotive conglomerate GAZ Group until January 26, 2022, the US Treasury Department said in a letter on Wednesday.

"[A]ll transactions and activities otherwise prohibited by the Ukraine Related Sanctions Regulations, 31 C.F.R. part 589, that are ordinarily incident and necessary (1) to divest or transfer debt, equity, or other holdings in GAZ Group to a non-US person, or (2) to facilitate the transfer of debt, equity, or other holdings in GAZ Group by a non-US person to another non-US person, are authorized through 12:01 a.m. eastern standard time, January 26, 2022," the letter said.

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US Authorizes 2 Intelligence Aircraft Sale to Kazakhstan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US State Department said in a statement on Wednesday that it has approved a sale to Kazakhstan of two aircraft with intelligence equipment for more than \$128 million.

"The Defense Security Cooperation Agency delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale on yesterday," the statement said.

Kazakhstan requested to buy two King Air B300ER Scorpion Aircraft with Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance Mission Systems and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$128.1 million.

"This proposed sale will support the foreign policy goals and national security objectives of the United States by improving the security of a partner country that is a force for political stability and economic progress in Central Asia," the statement said.

The deal will improve Kazakhstan's capability to meet current and future threats and will not alter the basic military balance in the region, the statement added.

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US Arrests Woman for Threats to Election Official - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - A former resident in the US state of Michigan faces up to two decades in prison following her arrest for threatening an unnamed election official and the

official's family during the recent presidential campaign, the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

"[Katelyn] Jones is alleged to have knowingly and willfully transmitted communications containing threats to injure AV-1 and her family due to actions AV-1 took in her official capacity at Chair of the Wayne County Board of Canvases," the release said.

Jones was arrested Wednesday morning and was due for an initial court appearance later in the day, the release said.

Jones is accused of sending AV-1 two graphic photographs of a bloody, naked, mutilated, dead woman lying on the ground, immediately followed by the transmission of a photo of AV-1's minor daughter, the release added.

Jones sent the threats as text messages and also as posts on the Instagram social media platform, according to the release.

If convicted, Jones faces up to 20 years in federal prison, and a fine of up to \$250,000, the release said.

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Canada Authorizes Moderna's Coronavirus Vaccine - Health Agency

TORONTO, December 23 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has made a final decision to approve Moderna's coronavirus vaccine, the nation's health agency said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, Health Canada authorized the second COVID-19 vaccine in Canada, manufactured by Moderna," the statement said.

The determination was made after a thorough review that lasted more than two months, the statement also said.

Health Canada explained in the statement the authorization represents a critical step in ensuring additional vaccines are available to all Canadians in all parts of the country.

"The different storage and handling requirements of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine mean that it can be distributed to isolated and remote communities, including the territories," the statement added.

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UN, Authorities in Tigray Agree on Setting Up Mechanism for Aid Delivery - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United Nations reached an agreement with the relevant authorities in Ethiopia's Tigray region on establishing temporary humanitarian information-sharing mechanisms to facilitate delivery of aid into the conflict-hit northern region, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"Our colleagues in OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) also together with the logistics cluster for the UN, led by the World Food Program (WFP), agreed with the relevant authorities on setting up temporary humanitarian information-sharing mechanisms to facilitate access, movements, safety and security of humanitarian assets, personnel and activities in Tigray, this includes border areas where there may be people in need," Dujarric said.

The spokesman added that in the meantime, the United Nations continues to engage with the government and all relevant actors for the safe movement of humanitarian personnel and supplies throughout the embattled region.

In November, the federal government accused the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the ruling party of the province, of attacking a local military base and launched a security operation against it. Later in the month, the government claimed to have captured the region's capital, Mekele.

On November 29, the Ethiopian government and the United Nations struck a deal to open Tigray for relief supplies for refugees displaced by recent fighting. The United Nations estimates that some one million people have been displaced by the fighting in Tigray, including more than 52,000 into eastern Sudan.

According to the United Nations, the first convoy with medical aid arrived in Mekelle on December 12, followed by the WFP's food delivery for 35,000 refugees in Adi Harush and Mai Ayni camps on December 21.

The UN Humanitarian response plan for northern Ethiopia seeks \$116.5 million to provide immediate assistance to some 2.3 million people, while the UN Refugee Agency appealed for \$156 million to meet Ethiopian refugees' needs through the first half of 2021.

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New York City to Enforce Quarantine of All UK Travelers - Mayor

NEW YORK, December 23 (Sputnik) - New York City will enforce a quarantine of all travelers from Britain to contain the spread of a new strain of COVID-19, Mayor Bill de Blasio said Wednesday.

UK's health agency announced last week that a new highly-contagious strain of COVID-19 had been detected in southeast England.

"We're going to have sheriff deputies go to the home or the hotel of every single traveler coming in from the UK," de Blasio told a live-streamed briefing. "There's going to be a follow-up, direct home or hotel visit from the sheriff's deputy to confirm that they are following the quarantine, or if they are not, they will be penalized."

De Blasio said sheriff deputies will also station at airports, train stations and bus depots. Law enforcement has already been pulling people over on highways and some 10,000 vehicle stops have already been done, the mayor said.

"We are going to be doing that intensively during this holiday season up through the weekend after January 1," de Blasio said.

He said those found to have violated quarantine could be fined a minimum \$1,000 and an additional \$1,000 for each day they did not quarantine.

"We will collect those penalties," the mayor said. "We are really serious about the fact that if you violate quarantine you are creating a danger for everyone else."

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo also said he has enlisted the help of British Airways, Delta Airlines and Virgin Atlantic to pre-screen passengers coming into New York from UK locations.

The Trump administration, so far, has not announced any federal ban on UK travelers.

UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock announced last week that a new strain of COVID-19, later identified as VUI-202012/01, had been identified in southeast England. The new variant is believed to be more easily transmitted than previously-identified strains of the disease.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned on Tuesday that the new strain may already be present in America, undetected. Dozens of countries across Europe and beyond have barred UK-originating travelers since news broke of the second COVID-19 strain.

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US Requires 'Made in Israel' Label on Imports From Jewish Settlements - Customs Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US imports originating in Jewish settlements in the West Bank must be labeled as Israeli-made, the Customs and Border Protection (CPB) agency said in a press release on Wednesday.

"Producers within certain areas designated in the Oslo Accords and the Hebron Protocol must mark their goods as "Israel," "Product of Israel," or "Made in Israel" when exporting those goods to the United States. Parties that import these goods into the United States are responsible for ensuring compliance with the marking requirements," the release said.

CPB published the rules in a Federal Register notice on Wednesday, based on guidance from the State Department that was intended to synchronize rules for imports from Israel and the Palestinian territories with US foreign policy, the release said.

Goods produced in Jewish settlements must be labeled "to reflect the fact that producers in these areas operate within the economic and administrative framework of Israel," the release added.

The 1993 Oslo accords and a subsequent agreement for the West Bank city of Hebron effectively divided the West Bank into separate zones controlled by Israeli settlers and the Palestinian Authority.

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US Requires Licenses to Import Aluminum in Bid to Enforce Trade Rules - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US importers of aluminum will need a license to continue operations beginning next month as the United States seeks additional data to enforce trade rules, the Commerce Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

"The new program will enable Commerce and the public to better detect potential transshipment and circumvention involving aluminum products - helping to ensure that domestic producers can compete on a level playing field," the release said.

The licensing requirement takes effect on January 23, 2021. Following a one-year grace period, the Commerce Department will require importers to report the country where imported aluminum products were smelted, the release said.

The licenses will be issued free of charge to importers who report the volume, value, country of origin and other information to US trade officials, the release said.

The new requirements are modeled after a similar system imposed earlier on US steel importers, the release added.

The Trump administration imposed import duties on global steel and aluminum producers as part of a so called America First trade policy.

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Pelosi Calls on Trump to Pressure Republican Leaders to Agree to \$2,000 Stimulus Checks
WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in a statement on Wednesday called on President Donald Trump to pressure congressional Republican leaders to agree to increase the coronavirus stimulus checks from \$600 to \$2,000.

On Tuesday, Trump threatened to veto a covid relief and spending package passed by Congress if it did not include changes such as boosting stimulus payments.

"Mr. President, sign the bill to keep government open! Urge [Senate Majority Leader Mitch] McConnell and [House Minority Leader Kevin] McCarthy to agree with the Democratic unanimous consent request for \$2,000 direct payments," Pelosi said in the statement.

Pelosi said Congress can complete this change in the emergency coronavirus relief bill by noon on Thursday.

McConnell and McCarthy have yet to signal support for the \$2,000 stimulus checks as of mid-day Wednesday.

Late on Monday, Congress passed a \$900 billion emergency coronavirus relief bill that was consolidated with a \$1.4 trillion spending bill to keep the government running in 2021. The Senate passed the bill with a 92-6 veto-proof margin. The House of Representatives passed the bill in two veto-proof votes.

On Tuesday, Trump threatened to veto the bill if lawmakers did not raise the stimulus checks from \$600 to \$2,000 for all qualifying adults and children in the United States. The president also called on lawmakers to trim down the bill by removing "wasteful and unnecessary items."

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OHCHR 'Deeply Concerned' About Trump Pardoning 4 Blackwater Contractors - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 23 (Sputnik) - UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is deeply concerned by US President Donald Trump's decision to pardon four private military security guards who were jailed for killing 14 civilians in Iraq in 2007, OHCHR spokesperson Marta Hurtado said in a statement on Wednesday.

"We are deeply concerned by the recent US presidential pardons for four security guards from the private military firm Blackwater who were convicted for killing 14 Iraqi civilians," Hurtado said. "Pardoning them contributes to impunity and has the effect of emboldening others to commit such crimes in the future."

On Tuesday, Trump granted full pardons to four former Blackwater contractors convicted in connection with the death of 14 Iraqi civilians, including two children, in Baghdad.

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US Sanctions Belarus Deputy Interior Minister, Election Commission - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed economic sanctions on the Belarus Deputy Interior Minister Gennady Kazakevich, the country's Central Election Commission as well as on law enforcement units for their role in the presidential election and the subsequent crackdown on opposition protesters, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Wednesday.

The Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control added Kazakevich, the Central Election Commission, the Minsk Special Purpose Police Unit, the Main Internal Affairs Directorate of the Minsk City Executive Committee and KGB Alfa to its Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list.

"Today... OFAC designated one individual and four entities for their roles in the fraudulent August 9, 2020, presidential election in Belarus and the subsequent violent crackdown on peaceful pro-democracy protests. These designations, pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13405, target individuals and entities who are responsible for, or have participated in, actions or policies that undermine democratic processes or institutions in Belarus," the statement said. As per the designation, all the designees' assets in the United States will be blocked and Americans are barred from any dealings with them.

On August 9, Belarus held a presidential election in which incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko won with slightly more than 80 percent of the vote. However, the opposition has claimed the election was rigged and its leader, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, had won. Many Western countries have refused to recognize Lukashenko as a legitimate president and

imposed sanctions. The Belarusian authorities say the crisis in the country was caused by foreign meddling.

The Treasury Department said Kazakevich was responsible for the actions of the Criminal Police in their role of carrying out a policy of violently cracking down on pro-democracy protests in Belarus.

The Minsk Special Purpose Police Unit, the Main Internal Affairs Directorate of the Minsk City Executive Committee and KGB Alpha - an elite unit of the Belarus' secret services - of being involved in "the violent post-election crackdown on and suppression of peaceful protests in Minsk, the statement said.

The Treasury Department also said the Belarus Central Election Commission was targeted for managing the August 9 election, which it claims included "a myriad of irregularities."

"The Belarusian people continually seek to peacefully exercise their basic democratic rights, and the state repeatedly responds with violent crackdowns. This action, in conjunction with those taken previously by the United States and our international partners, continue to hold accountable the individuals and organizations carrying out these unacceptable actions," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in the statement.

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US Cites COVID-19 to Explain 30% Drop in Illegal Alien Arrests in 2020 - Report

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States recorded more than 100,000 arrests of illegal aliens in fiscal year 2020, a drop of nearly one-third from the previous year that officials attributed the coronavirus pandemic, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency said in a press release on Wednesday.

"ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) conducted 103,603 arrests, just under 30 percent fewer than in fiscal year 2019 - largely due to the coronavirus pandemic. Approximately 90 percent of those arrested had a criminal conviction or charge," a press release summarizing the report said.

Those arrested included aliens with criminal charges or convictions for 1,837 homicide offenses, 37,247 assault offenses, and 10,302 sexual assault or sex offenses, the release said.

Deportations in fiscal 2020, which ended September 30, totaled 185,884 removals, the release added.

ICE also said it had reduced the population of illegal aliens in custody, with a targeted 70 percent cut in the capacity of immigrant detention facilities, according to the release.

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US Imposes Visa Restrictions on 39 People for 'Undermining Democracy' in Belarus - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed visa restrictions on 39 individuals for undermining democracy in Belarus, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The US Department of State has taken action... to identify 39 individuals responsible for undermining Belarusian democracy and has imposed visa restrictions on them," Pompeo said in the statement.

Pompeo noted that the State Department has so far imposed visa restrictions on 63 individuals for their role in the political crisis in Belarus.

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US Sanctions Belarus' Deputy Interior Minister, Election Commission - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on Belarus' Deputy Interior Minister Gennady Kazakevich and four entities, including the country's Central Election Commission, as well as on special law enforcement units over their conduct in the presidential elections and the crackdown on opposition protesters, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Wednesday.

The Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control added Kazakevich, the Central Election Commission, KGB Alpha, Minsk Special Purpose Police Unit and the Main Internal Affairs Directorate of the Minsk City Executive Committee to its Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list .

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US Inks \$356Mln Deal with Merck for Experimental COVID-19 Drug - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) – The United States has reached a \$356-million agreement with the pharmaceutical giant Merck to supply up to 100,000 doses of its experimental treatment for COVID-19, the Pentagon and Health and Human Services Department said in a joint press release on Wednesday.

"The investigational therapeutic is a promising first-in-class fusion protein and immune modulator," the release said. "Immune modulators have the potential to minimize the damaging effects of an overactive immune response to COVID-19. This overactive response can contribute to the severity of the illness."

The \$356-million deal will allow Merck to ramp up production of the medication and prepare for shipment in the first half of 2021, should the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) grant emergency use authorization for the drug named MK-7110. The medicine is intended for hospitalized patients with severe or critical COVID-19, the release said.

An Interim analysis of data from a Phase 3 clinical trial indicated that patients who received a single dose of the therapeutic had a 60 percent greater chance of clinical recovery than those who received a placebo. Preliminary analysis also showed that the treatment potentially reduces the risk of respiratory failure or death by 50 percent compared to the standard of care, the release added.

The US is following a strategy used to develop coronavirus vaccines, in which large-scale production begins before researchers know whether the product being tested is safe and works as intended.

OWS is a partnership between the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Defense Department that funds development and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostic tests.

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US Military Bases In Europe to Receive COVID-19 Vaccine This Week – EUCOM

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) – US military installations in Europe will start receiving Moderna's COVID-19 vaccines as early as this week, the European Command (EUCOM) said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Medical treatment facilities in Europe will receive the initial shipment of the COVID-19 vaccine at 28 locations in nine countries across the US EUCOM area of responsibility starting this week," the statement said.

US military and civilian personnel will be vaccinated in a prioritized order in compliance with the Pentagon's vaccine distribution plan, it added.

"While the speed at which this vaccine was developed is unprecedented, the thorough research showing its safety and efficacy is compelling," EUCOM surgeon general Mark Kobelja said. He urged all personnel to get the vaccine as soon as it becomes available.

Earlier in December, the US Food and Drug Administration granted emergency use authorization for Moderna's coronavirus vaccine, after previously giving the green light to Pfizer and BioNTech's COVID-19 shot.

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US Embassy in CAR Tells Employees to Shelter in Place amid Violence - Alert

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US Embassy in the Central African Republic (CAR) announced on Wednesday that it issued an immediate shelter in place notice for its employees amid reports of nationwide violence and fears of the armed opposition's offensive on Bangui, the country's capital.

"US Embassy Bangui has received reports of violence and general panic in Bangui ... as well as ongoing instability in the provinces. The US embassy issued an immediate shelter in place notice for all employees," the mission said in an alert. "Armed groups may seek to move towards Bangui and/or cut off supply routes into the city."

The CAR government accuses Francois Bozize, who served as the country's president in 2003-2013 and was overthrown in a military uprising, of plotting a coup d'etat ahead of the December 27 general elections. The opposition, led by Bozize, mobilized its supporters for a "march" on Bangui. The situation was further aggravated by the decision of six armed groups to denounce the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the CAR.

The US Embassy said it was not aware of any specific incidents of violence or threats targeting American citizens, but warned that civil unrest, demonstrations and violence have already occurred, and may recur "in the period leading up to, during, and following the December 27 elections."

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Down 10% In Unexpected Reprieve From COVID-19 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Some 803,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, about 10 percent lower than the previous week, Labor Department data showed on Wednesday, as the struggling US job market experienced an unexpected reprieve from the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending December 19, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 803,000," the department said in a news release. It revised upward claims in the previous week to December 12 to 892,000 from a previously published 885,000. Despite that, the latest week's claims were lower by 89,000, or about 10 percent.

The 803,000 filings were the lowest in three weeks.

Continuing weekly claims, reported with a one-week lag but sometimes considered a better gauge of the labor market, also fell to 5.34 million from a previous 5.51 million. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, slipped by 0.2 percentage point to 3.6 percent.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, less than 700,000 jobs were added each month. In November, there were just 245,000 additions.

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

Notwithstanding the rebound, the economic outlook for the United States remains dire with a rash of new coronavirus infections reported across a nation with more than 18 million COVID-19 cases and 320,000 fatalities since January. Hospitalization has also hit daily record highs of above 100,000 in recent weeks, even as vaccine development efforts have been showing promise.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Down 10% to 803,000 for Week to Dec 19 - Labor Dept.

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YEAR IN REVIEW - US-Russian Arms Control Talks Die Amid Escalating Threats

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The year 2020 saw President Donald Trump and his administration destroy some of the final vestiges of an international arms control regime that took a half century to build, while leaving his successor just over two week to salvage the sole remaining US-Russian nuclear pact.

In January, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists moved the Doomsday Clock to 100 seconds before midnight, citing the unraveling of international arms control agreements in favor of narrow domestic political interests. The announcement came six months after the US exited the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

In May of 2020, the US unburdened itself from another arms control accord - the Open Skies Treaty - a mutual aerial reconnaissance agreement. This left the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which expires on February 5, 2021, as the only arms control agreement between the US and Russia. Moreover, it also represents the only mechanism remaining that limits the two superpowers' nuclear arsenals.

Since the day Trump took office his administration sought to remove any constraints on US military power and America's ability to develop weapons - including missiles of all types and ranges.

Former Canadian diplomat Patrick Armstrong, who once served as Political Counselor at Ottawa's embassy in Moscow, succinctly echoed the atomic scientists concerns over the short-sightedness of Washington's decisions.

"The Trump Administration seems to be determined to kill off every remaining Cold War arms control treaty," Armstrong told Sputnik after the US left the Open Skies Treaty. "More of Washington's short-term gain for long-term pain."

NEW END NEARS

The New START treaty was signed by President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in Prague in 2010, before entering into force in 2011. The pact, which can be extended for another five years, limits each country's strategic nuclear arsenals to 1,550 deployed warheads and 700 deployed missiles and heavy bombers. New START superseded the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), also known as the Moscow Treaty, which capped warheads at 2,200. It also follows the 1991 START 1 treaty, which limited the superpowers to 6,000 warheads each.

Russia wants to renew New START for five years with no changes and is interested in having the United Kingdom and France become part of the discussions because they possess nuclear stockpiles comparable to that of China. The United States, for its part, has said it would consider a one-year extension if Russia caps the buildup of its nuclear arsenal, which was not covered by the original New START.

US President-elect Joe Biden, who will take over the White House on January 20, was vice president when the Obama administration concluded New START a decade ago. Moreover, Biden has expressed a willingness to extend the treaty. Russian President Vladimir Putin is already looking for signals regarding the treaty's future from the incoming Biden administration. "If nothing happens this treaty will stop existing in February 2021... I said we were ready for more talks," Putin said during his annual press conference on December 17. "I know that the newly elected president, Biden, said... they wanted to preserve this fundamental treaty. We are ready for this but we need to see some reaction from our American partners."

After what happened in 2019, several world leaders, international organizations - along with US lawmakers - expressed fears that the Trump administration would exit New START or simply allow it to die.

In January, UN Under-Secretary-General Izumi Nakamitsu called on the United States and Russia to extend New START for as long as possible, in the current form, a message Secretary-General Antonio Guterres underscored later in the year. Even NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stressed the importance of saving the treaty.

In August, the head of the US House Armed Services Committee and the Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations committee warned of the costs and risks of not renewing the pact. "Extending the New START Treaty for a full five years is clearly the right financial and national security choice. America cannot afford a costly and dangerous nuclear arms race, particularly in the middle of our current financial, political, and health crises," US Senator Bob Menendez and Congressman Adam Schiff said in a joint statement.

In terms of financial impact, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projected that if the US reverted to START I limits (6,000 warheads), for example, the Pentagon would incur up to \$439 billion in additional onetime acquisition costs and \$28 billion in additional annual operation and sustainment costs.

FALSE STARTS: TALKS ON ROAD TO NOWHERE

The Trump administration made some overtures about jumpstarting talks, although most of it appeared to be lip service, leaving many to wonder if they were ever serious. The US also complicated issues by aggressively - yet futilely - pushing the concept that China should join an agreement - something Beijing repeatedly rejected. Moreover, it hardly seemed possible to craft

and reach some new complicated arrangement, trilateral or otherwise, before New START expired.

Trump, despite little progress in the first half of the year, continued to express optimism that a deal could be reached, including during a call with his Russian counterpart ahead of mid-summer meetings between negotiating teams.

"President Trump reiterated his hope of avoiding an expensive three-way arms race between China, Russia and the United States, and looked forward to progress on upcoming arms control negotiations in Vienna," White House spokesman Judd Deere said in a statement after the US president's call with Putin on July 23.

The US and Russia had a number of "talks about talks," but the negotiations process never took off, although a glimmer of hope came in June, when Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov and US Special Representative for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea during a meeting in Austria launched a process to purportedly rescue New START. This was followed by a meeting of US and Russian delegations in Vienna from July 27-30 in the framework of a bilateral strategic dialogue. Expert working groups discussed a range of issues from verification to space security.

However, no substantial progress was made towards closing the gap between both parties with respect to renewing New START. After another round of talks in Vienna in August, Ryabkov said the US team avoided answering the question as to whether they are ready to extend the treaty.

In September, a State Department official told Sputnik it wanted a trilateral agreement that boosted verification.

"Russia should commit to a framework that would lead to a new agreement on all nuclear warheads, improve verification under the current treaty on strategic systems, and set the stage for a comprehensive, verifiable treaty on the nuclear arsenals of the United States, Russia, and China," the spokesperson said on September 21.

Ryabkov, on the same day, said Russia considers it inconceivable to strengthen the control and verification measures in New START.

After talks in Helsinki in October, Ryabkov shot down reports that the two sides were close to reaching a deal to freeze nuclear arsenals. The October 5 talks with Billingslea, he added, "demonstrated that huge differences remain."

The year ended with a series of threats and allegations, including Washington saying it was ready to deploy weapons banned under New START. In November, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov pointed out that Russia would survive.

"If the United States breaks the last remaining... treaty on strategic arms reduction, it will be their decision, which we see in a negative light, of course. But we do not see it as a tragedy," Lavrov told reporters, adding that Russia had "everything necessary to ensure its security."

On December 8, Billingslea accused Moscow of building up an arsenal "of thousands of nuclear warheads that are completely unconstrained by the New START treaty." Two days later, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy that Billingslea had ignored all Moscow's own constructive proposals and instead was advancing aggressive policies against both Russia and China.

In the end, the biggest boost to arms control talks and prospects to salvaging New START may have come on December 14, when the US Electoral College officially confirmed that Trump had lost the November 3 election.

OPEN SKIES CLOSED

The two superpowers have also sparred over other arms control pacts, including the 1992 Open Skies Treaty the US left in May, citing Russian violations. Moscow has denied breaking the terms of the pact that aims to build trust among 34 states by allowing mutual aerial reconnaissance flights over each participating country's territory.

The US first informed Moscow that it would stay in the treaty if Russia would return to compliance. The Russian Foreign Ministry said that Moscow would work with the United States only on a mutual basis and would not accept any ultimatums.

Professor Edward Lozansky, director of Russia House in Washington and president of the American University in Moscow, said the US could have taken steps to resolve the situation before exiting the deal.

"If Moscow, as the United States claims, has violated this agreement, for example, by imposing restrictions on its flights near Kaliningrad or any other provisions of this treaty the way to resolve this problem is to call for negotiation," Lozansky said.

Despite the US move, Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Russian Federation Council's foreign affairs committee, told Sputnik the treaty would stay in force if all NATO countries guaranteed that they would not send data they obtained to third parties, particularly to the United States.

THREATS IN A POST-INF WORLD

The Pentagon did not wait long in the post-INF era to begin making and testing weapons previously banned under the treaty, which had prohibited the US and Russia from developing or fielding nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,417 miles). The United States has also signaled that it will deploy such weapons to both Europe and the Asia-Pacific region.

Russia, for its part, said it has not tested and does not have intermediate- and shorter-range missiles in service, although it was in the advanced stages of preparing an adequate response. US officials continued to boast about fast-tracking the development and deployment of such weapons in 2020. US Deputy Defense Secretary David Norquist at a press conference in September said that now that the US is out of the INF Treaty, the Pentagon is making "rapid progress" to field ground-launched missiles.

In October, Putin reaffirmed Russia's commitment to a moratorium on deployment of intermediate- and short-range missiles in Europe as long as there are no US missiles. However, NATO and Washington rejected Russia's proposals. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik that ignoring Putin's ideas show an irresponsible approach to European security.

"This is a reflection of the Russian Federation leadership's policy of looking for a way to stabilize the military and political situation in Europe, in terms of preventing the emergence of new missile crises there," Ryabkov explained after Putin unveiled his proposals.

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov warned Washington that Moscow will respond if the United States deploys intermediate and shorter-range ground-based missiles in Europe or the Asia-Pacific.

"Pentagon is rapidly developing systems previously prohibited under the [INF] Treaty and has already conducted two tests of such systems. Washington intends to deploy them in Asia-Pacific and Europe. The implementation of such plans in the Far East will pose a direct threat to Russia's national security and nuclear deterrence capability. We will be forced to react," the ambassador said during a panel discussion at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies on October 26.

However, Antonov added, Russia is ready to search for ways to maintain stability and prevent missile crises "in a world without the INF Treaty" as it applies to the Asia-Pacific.

"The Russian leader has suggested considering specific options for adopting mutual verification measures in order to address existing concerns. In particular, these are the verification measures with regard to the Aegis Ashore complexes with Mk-41 launchers that are deployed at US and NATO bases in Europe, as well as 9M729 missiles in the Kaliningrad region," Antonov said.

MILITARIZING SPACE

Trump, in the run up to the 2020 election, felt the US Space Force (USSF) that was instituted at the end of last year was a key issue he could exploit.

"SPACE FORCE. VOTE!" Trump tweeted from the hospital while being treated for covid a month before the November 3 election.

On December 18, Vice President Mike Pence announced that the 4,000 personnel in the US Space Force will be called "Guardians." Trump, he added, in establishing the force was focused on renewing US leadership in human space exploration and "ensuring that America remained as dominant in space as we are in land and air and sea."

Pence also said that space is a "war-fighting domain," before alleging that China and Russia are aggressively seeking ways to cut into US dominance.

The US Space Force was allocated about \$15 billion in the 2021 defense budget, down from \$40 billion in 2020, which includes funding for research and development, operations, and procurement.

In October, Russia, alarmed by the US bid to militarize the domain, submitted two draft resolutions on no first placement of weapons in space for consideration by the UN General Assembly First Committee dealing with disarmament and international security matters. Washington near the end of the year slammed Russia for testing a missile allegedly intended to target satellites in orbit.

"Russia conducted an anti-satellite missile test. #Russia continues to weaponize #space. @US_SpaceCom stands ready to protect/defend US/allied interests from aggression in the space domain," the command said in a tweet.

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

Both the US and Russia are parties to the Outer Space Treaty, along with China, India, the UK and over 100 other nations, prohibiting the militarization of space. The treaty does not prohibit countries from developing technology to shoot down their own defunct satellites, with US, Russia, China and India having demonstrated the capability to do so.

FRESH START: BEYOND NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL?

Successful collaboration on extending New START could provide Moscow and the Biden administration with an opportunity to address other pressing issues. In fact, challenging the prevailing orthodox wisdom, Carnegie Center Moscow expert Alexander Gabuev, citing unnamed Kremlin officials, said many within the Russian government look forward to working with a president who knows how to organize a "normal" process for national security discussions.

In addition to retaining the pillars of the arms control regime, he added, the incoming Biden administration might also be open to discussing rules around competition in cyberspace. Overall, outside of US disengagement and keeping the Western alliance in disarray, Trump's re-election presents more threats than opportunities.

"After US-Russian relations nearly hit rock bottom on Trump's watch, nobody in Russia believes that four more years of Trump could be good for Moscow," Gabuev wrote in a November 3 Foreign Policy piece. "Schadenfreude over the gradual demise of Pax Americana would simply sugarcoat the risks and downsides of Trump remaining in the White House."

Brookings Institution scholar Michael O'Hanlon told Sputnik that Biden would be in lockstep with Russia on keeping the Iran nuclear agreement intact. Moreover, he boldly suggested cooperation could extend beyond arms control, such as working on diplomatic deals to resolving the conflicts in Syria and Libya. Albeit, the think tank scholar indicated that a meeting of the minds on some issues would be akin to landing an aircraft on a celestial body.

"Ideally, too, we'd actually try to solve the Ukraine problem with a negotiated settlement on the Donbas and a lifting of sanctions on Russia. But that seems like a moonshot at present,"

O'Hanlon soberly concluded.

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RPT- Russian Church Abroad to Host Youth Conference Despite Strict COVID-19 Restrictions
WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The Russian Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) will hold its traditional youth conference in a limited format on December 25 despite strict COVID-19 restrictions, the conference director, Archpriest Alexey Duncan, told Sputnik.

"This year with the COVID-19 we have great restrictions and we are not able to conduct the conference as we usually do. However, metropolitan Hilarion of New York, archbishop Gabriel of Montreal, Canada, and bishop Nicholas of Manhattan will be serving the Divine Liturgy with a number of priests and deacons in ROCOR Synod in New York," Father Alexey said on Tuesday. The annual assembly of young Orthodox parishioners, established by the ROCOR in the late 1970s, was named after St. Herman of Alaska, one of the Russian missionaries who came to the Russian colonies in America in the 18th century.

"The fest of St. Herman of Alaska falls on the same day as Catholic Christmas - December 25. Our church realized that our young people have a different calendar and spiritual experience than the rest of their American friends, and so it was necessary for us to offer them something that would keep them in tune with our Russian traditions," Father Alexey said.

Traditionally, almost 200 young adults from different countries gather in one of the ROCOR parishes, generally in the northeastern portion of the US, to discuss major topics of their church life. This year, however, no more than 35 people would be able to take part in the conference in person in Synod, while another 100 participants will join services online.

"I am quite sure that after the Divine Liturgy on December 25 the young people that are able to attend the service in person will be able to get together to have a discussion," Father Alexey said.

Discussions will include a centennial of the Russian Church Abroad, fight against COVID-19, coronavirus-related restrictions upon churches, and how Orthodox Christians need to approach those issues, he added.

Young Russian Orthodox outside and inside Russia face similar problems and have similar ways to solve them, the priest noted.

"The big question for everyone is how you live the spiritual life and how you maintain Russian Orthodox traditions. There are many elements of that, such as the COVID-19, but also simply matters of politics because we live in the world that is somewhat turned upside down," he said.