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Wuhan's COVID-19 Case Count May Have Been 10 Times Higher Than Reported, Study Finds by [Mary F.](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic first broke out in the Chinese city of Wuhan. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the outbreak of the novel coronavirus was first reported there on December 31, 2019. Since then, the virus has spread to more than 200 countries and territories across the globe, infecting more than 81 million people.

A [recent study](#) conducted by Chinese public health authorities reveals that the number of COVID-19 cases in Wuhan earlier this year may have been 10 times the recorded tally, meaning that as many as half a million residents of the city in Hubei Province may have been infected with the virus during the outbreak's early days.

The study, released late Monday by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), surveyed more than 34,000 people in April and found that around 4.4% of those tested were found to be carrying antibodies for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

The study estimates the scale of past infections in a population from testing blood serum samples from a group of people for COVID-19 antibodies.

The serological survey thus suggests that as many as 500,000 residents of Wuhan, which has a total population of 11 million, may have been infected, which would represent a nearly 10-fold increase from the 50,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported by officials in April, [Bloomberg reported](#).

The study also suggests that the infection rate in Wuhan was much higher than in other parts of China. For example, the survey indicated that only 0.44% of Hubei Province residents surveyed were carrying antibodies. In addition, only two people tested positive for such antibodies among 12,000 people surveyed in six other cities and provinces, including Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong.

Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, [told CNN](#) that the study results indicate that infections were underreported during the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan.

As of Sunday, there had been 50,354 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the city, [according to the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission](#).

Last month, leaked documents [provided to CNN](#) from an anonymous whistleblower who worked in the Chinese health care system indicated that the COVID-19 case numbers released to the public during the outbreak allegedly did not contain the full extent of the internal data to which officials had access. For example, on February 10, Chinese officials reported 3,911 new confirmed or suspected cases in Hubei to the public. However, in a file labeled "internal document, please keep confidential," the Hubei Provincial CDC recorded 5,918 new confirmed, clinically diagnosed, suspected or test-confirmed cases on that date.

China has faced extensive criticism for its initial handling of COVID-19, with countries like the US accusing China of covering up the early days of the pandemic in the country.

In May, US President Donald Trump accused the WHO of helping the Chinese government conceal the deadly virus, prompting him to cut the US' ties with the agency.

"The world is now suffering as a result of the malfeasance of the Chinese government," Trump [said in a speech](#) in the White House's Rose Garden at the time. "Countless lives have been taken, and profound economic hardship has been inflicted all around the globe."

China has repeatedly defended its COVID-19 response. In June, the Chinese government said that it has always [published COVID-19 related information](#) in a timely and transparent fashion.

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EU to Purchase Another 100 Million Doses of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine
by [Mary F.](#)

The Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine received authorization for conditional use from the European Commission on December 21. The decision came on the same day that the European Medicines Agency's (EMA) Committee for Medicinal Products for Human Use (CHMP) recommended authorizing the vaccine.

Officials on Tuesday revealed that the European Union will purchase an additional 100 million doses of the vaccine, as the union move forward with plans to inoculate its 450 million-person population.

"We decided to take an additional 100 million doses of the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine, which is already being used to vaccinate people across the EU," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced on Twitter on Tuesday. The purchase will bring the EU's total number of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine doses to 300 million.

In a [news release](#), Pfizer and BioNTech confirmed that they will be supplying 100 million doses of the vaccine to the European Union next year, in accordance with the terms of the bloc's Advanced Purchase Agreement signed on November 11.

"We remain committed to moving as quickly and safely as possible to bring this vaccine to more people in Europe, as the deadly virus continues to spread at an alarming rate," said Pfizer Chairman and CEO Albert Bourla. "In partnership with the European Commission, member states and healthcare providers, we will be able to reach a total of 150 million Europeans across the continent."

"The additional 100 million doses will be delivered in 2021 supporting the vaccination campaigns which started two days ago in all 27 member states. Our goal remains to bring a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine to as many people as we can all around the world," Ugur Sahin, CEO and co-founder of BioNTech, also noted in the news release.

In its [first contract with the EU](#), Pfizer and BioNTech agreed to provide 200 million doses to the bloc at \$18.80 per dose. The additional doses will be sold at the same price, and all 300 million doses are expected to be delivered in 2020 and 2021.

Over the weekend, European Union countries started receiving their first shipments of the COVID-19 vaccine. Vulnerable people and medical workers will be the first to receive shots. The European Union is expected to approve Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine for use next month. It has already [purchased 160 million doses](#) of the Moderna drug.

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Syrian Air Defences Respond to 'Israeli Aggression' in Damascus Airspace - SANA
by [Mary F.](#)

Explosions were heard in Syria on Wednesday local time, as the state-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported that Syrian air defenses were responding to "Israeli aggression" in Damascus airspace.

No casualties have been reported. Furthermore, no official statement regarding the explosions has been issued by the Syrian government.

The latest report comes after Syrian air defenses responded to "Israeli aggression" in the area of Masyaf, in the northwest of the country last week.

"Precisely at 0:40 am today [22:40 on Thursday, GMT], the enemy Israeli jets fired missiles from the Lebanese airspace, over the city of Tripoli, toward the town of Masyaf in the western part of the Hama province," [the Syrian Ministry of Defense said in a statement last week.](#)

Earlier this month, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Aviv Kochavi revealed that Israel has conducted numerous strikes in Syria targeting what the Israeli military alleges are Iranian-backed groups located in the country.

"We have struck over 500 targets this year, on all fronts, in addition to multiple clandestine missions," [Kochavi said at the time.](#)

"The Iranian entrenchment in Syria is in a clear slowdown as a result of IDF activity, but we still have a long way to go to complete our goals in this arena," Kochavi added.

Syria has been embroiled in a civil war since March 2011. The conflict has [killed hundreds of thousands of people](#) and caused [more than 5 million](#) Syrians to become refugees.

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Despite Victory, Biden Complains of Continued Transition 'Obstruction' by Pentagon, Budget Office

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After US President Donald Trump continued to contest the November 3 election for weeks after, most government agencies all but refused to begin bringing US President-elect Joe Biden up to speed. Biden has claimed this endangers a smooth transition in January 2021 as the US faces diplomatic and health crises.

Biden has claimed that with three weeks until his presidential inauguration, key figures at the Pentagon and the White House Office of Management and Budget remain intransigent, refusing to cooperate with Biden's transition team.

"Right now we just aren't getting all the information that we need from the outgoing administration in key national security areas. It's nothing short, in my view, of irresponsibility," [Biden told the press during Monday remarks](#) in Wilmington, Delaware. He said he was facing "obstruction" from the "political leadership" at both institutions.

"We need full visibility into the budget planning under way at the Defense Department and other agencies in order to avoid any window of confusion or catch-up that our adversaries may try to exploit," Biden continued.

Indeed, immediately upon assuming office on January 20, Biden will face a diplomatic crisis: the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), [a nuclear weapons limitation agreement with Russia](#), is set to expire on February 5, and the Trump administration has done nothing to move toward renewing or extending it.

Continued Opposition by Trump

The intransigence stems from Trump's continued refusal to concede defeat in the November 3 presidential election, which Biden carried in both the popular vote and the Electoral College. The College confirmed those results earlier this month, casting their official ballots that decide the election's true winner - a majority of electors voted for Biden as well.

Trump has claimed Biden's victory is illegitimate, the result of widespread voter fraud and corruption.

"A group of Republican lawmakers in Pennsylvania say 200,000 more votes were counted in the 2020 Election than voters (100% went to Biden). State Representative Frank Ryan said they found troubling discrepancies after an analysis of Election Day data," [Trump tweeted on Tuesday](#), quoting a report by Fox News.

"Can you imagine if the Republicans stole a Presidential Election from the Democrats - All hell would break out," he added. Twitter flagged the tweet thread as containing disputed claims about the election, [in line with the company's policy to discourage](#) the spreading of disinformation about the election.

Only after several weeks did a trickle of US agencies begin to see the writing on the wall and unofficially recognize Biden as the winner. The all-important General Services Administration, which greases the gears of the federal bureaucracy, [only began cooperating with Biden on November 24](#). Biden has said the intransigence has greatly frustrated his forthcoming administration's ability to craft a COVID-19 vaccine rollout plan, as well as his and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris' being brought up to speed on sensitive diplomatic, military and intelligence issues in time for them to take over next month.

On December 18, acting US Defense Secretary [Christopher Miller issued a statement saying](#) the Pentagon had done nothing to obstruct the transition, but noted a "mutually-agreed upon holiday pause" on briefings would begin the next day. Miller was appointed just last month after Trump fired Mark Esper as Pentagon chief as part of a housecleaning that saw other administration figures similarly removed who had clashed with Trump prior to the election. Biden's campaign immediately refuted the claim. "Let me be clear: There was no mutually agreed upon holiday break," Yohannes Abraham, executive director of [Biden's transition team](#).

[told reporters](#). “In fact, we think it is important that briefings and other engagements continue during this period as there’s no time to spare.”

‘Enormous Damage’ Done to Security Agencies

However, Biden noted on Monday that from what he had seen from briefings so far, four years of Trump’s administration had done “enormous damage” to agencies “critical to our security.” “Many of them have been hollowed out in personnel, capacity and in morale,” Biden said. “All of it makes it harder for our government to protect the American people, to defend our vital interests in a world where threats are constantly evolving and our adversaries are constantly adapting.”

In January, the State Department [inspector general called attention to the disastrously](#) low morale among department staff, stemming not just from it being embroiled in one controversy after another, but also due to a 16-month hiring freeze that saw under-qualified staff being overworked in positions they shouldn’t have been filling. One survey produced by the Partnership for Public Service and the Boston Consulting Group [found a nearly 9-percentage-point decline in morale](#) over the years 2018-19.

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McConnell Swats Down Quick Senate Vote on Larger Relief Checks, Promises ‘Process’ for Consideration

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Following months of legislative debate, US President Donald Trump has sent back a new COVID-19 relief bill, urging Congress to include larger payments to struggling families. However, the \$2,000 amount he has proposed is larger than the \$1,200 Democrats proposed before being argued down to \$600 by Republicans.

As debate raged in the US Senate on Tuesday, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) rejected pleas for a quick vote on adding Trump’s proposed changes.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) both urged a quick, unanimous consent vote on Trump’s requested increase of COVID-19 relief payments to families from \$600 to \$2,000, but McConnell rejected the move, giving an ambiguous answer on whether the issue would even get a vote.

Noting [the president "would like further direct financial support](#) for American households” as well as an amendment removing Section 230 of the 1996 Telecommunications Act and a probe of the November 3 election Trump still has not conceded to having lost, [McConnell said, "This week, the Senate](#) will begin a process to bring these three priorities into focus.”

Originally introduced in May as a \$2.2 trillion bill, McConnell’s stern rejection of another COVID-19 stimulus measure put the effort on “pause” [until Democrats re-introduced an updated version in September](#). However, compromise after compromise has seen the bill whittled down to \$900 billion and the direct payments to Americans halved from \$1,200, [as happened with the first relief bill in March](#), to just \$600.

However, McConnell's primary concern this week is overriding Trump's veto of another huge spending bill, the \$740 billion National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which funds the Pentagon. [He has set up a Wednesday vote on the override](#), which requires two-thirds of the Senate instead of a simple majority; the House of Representatives [voted to override on Monday](#). Sanders, who voted against the NDAA on its first pass through Congress, pledged to slow down the override voting process until McConnell agreed to hold a vote on the \$2,000 direct payment increase as well - a gambit that has so far failed.

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Beijing Pushes 'National Team' of State-Owned Enterprises to Drive Industrial Growth
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were the quickest firms to rebound after the country's COVID-19 related shutdowns earlier this year, Beijing has reconsidered their value in the coming year, especially in light of the self-sufficiency priorities of the new five-year plan. As 2020 draws to a close, China will be the only major nation whose economy did not contract, registering a modest 2% growth. While China was the first nation to experience the COVID-19 outbreak that by March had become a global pandemic, the country's quick and extensive lockdowns and supporting testing and quarantine measures helped the country to begin to resume some kind of business as usual by mid-year.

However, for 2021, Beijing expects a big boom. Fitch Ratings has predicted an 8% expansion of gross domestic product for the People's Republic of China next year, helped by expectations that global vaccinations against COVID-19 will allow many nations currently under lockdown, including the United States and much of Western Europe, to relax restrictions in the coming months. [According to CNBC, other estimates ranged](#) from 9% by Nomura to 7.8% by Natixis. [A recent report by the Center for Economics and Business Research](#) (CEBR), a British think tank, found the Chinese economy could overtake the US economy as the world's largest by 2028.

At China's State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) annual conference on Friday, chairman Hao Peng urged the country's SOEs, which have been key to the dramatic economic growth of the last 40 years, to take on new roles of leadership and coordination to push industrial expansion even higher.

"Central government SOEs must be the 'national team' that can provide solid support for economic and social development," [Hao said, according to the South China Morning Post \(SCMP\)](#). "We must build a group of industrial champions, a group of technologically-innovative pioneers, a group of leaders in specialty fields, and a group of enterprises that can guarantee supply of basic [materials and goods]."

According to SASAC data viewed by the outlet, China's 97 central SOEs are projected to reach \$10.5 trillion in collective value - a 45% increase from just five years ago. Their average annual growth of revenues was 5.6%, and of profits, 8.9%.

[In April, Chinese President Xi Jinping hailed the SOEs](#) as the economic and political foundation of China's socialist system, saying, "They must be built stronger, better and larger." By June, two months after the lockdown in former COVID-19 epicenter Wuhan ended, [the Chinese Ministry of Finance had reported that SOEs](#) had posted their first year-on-year growth of 2020, while a September report by the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce (ACFIC) found that 96% of the country's top 500 private corporations [had been "walloped" by the pandemic, as SCMP put it](#), and 60.8% had been unable to fill customer orders due to supply chain disruptions.

Data on the January-June period [posted by the National Bureau of Statistics in July reveals](#) a good part of the reason why: China's SOEs enjoyed 2.1% growth in fixed-asset investment, while private sector companies saw a disastrous 7.3% decline.

Nearly half of China's 97 SOEs are on the list of the world's top 500 companies, but even private corporations like Alibaba Group and Huawei are world leaders. The Chinese government [has been careful to protect its industries from US](#) attempts to limit or control them, as in the trade war [and US government blacklists of recent years](#), including giving out tax write-offs and subsidies.

The US' attacks on Chinese industries and the trade restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic have helped motivate a new focus on self-sufficiency. Ahead of the drafting of the country's 14th five-year plan in November, [the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China urged](#) a focus on "technological self-reliance." Ning Jizhe, deputy head of the National Development and Reform Commission, noted this would act as a counterbalance to "protectionism and unilateralism" and an "imbalance of economic development" that threaten China's economy from without.

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Kim Jong Un Calls First Congress of Ruling Workers Party of Korea in Four Years for Next Month
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is likely to face a new challenge in January when Joe Biden is sworn in as US president. The Democratic president-elect has promised to take a tougher stance against Pyongyang than outgoing US President Donald Trump. During a Tuesday meeting of the Political Bureau of the Workers Party of Korea (WPK) presided over by party chairman Kim Jong Un, the leadership body decided to hold its first party congress in four years.

[According to Pyongyang's Korean Central News Agency \(KCNA\)](#), the bureau "made exhaustive discussion" and decided upon qualifications for party delegates to be selected by party bodies to attend the congress, as well as how the congress would select its leadership bodies, and deliberated on the documents to be presented at the congress.

At the meeting, the Political Bureau also discussed the various achievements made in the ["80-day campaign," a massive, nationwide effort announced](#) in October to help the country

recover from some of the natural disasters it had suffered during 2020, [including catastrophic flooding brought by several typhoons](#).

Among those efforts have been [reconstruction of the Huichon and Taedonggang](#) hydroelectric dams and the construction of new housing for families who lost their homes when rivers swelled over their banks.

[According to Seoul-based Yonhap News Agency](#), the congress will be the party's first in four years and is likely to yield updated economic and foreign policy plans for the country.

One of the stickier issues for Pyongyang was resolved earlier this month when [the South Korean parliament voted to ban activists](#) from launching balloons carrying propaganda leaflets across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas. Their earlier refusal [led the DPRK to sever relations with the South](#), and in a dramatic display of how seriously the matter was taken, the North [blew up the liaison office in Kaesong that had symbolized](#) the historic rapprochement of recent years.

However, Biden's inauguration next month could present another new problem for Pyongyang, as [he has promised to deviate from Trump's policy](#) of negotiation since 2019. After a stormy display of military chest-beating early in his presidency, Trump later held three peace summits with Kim and became the first sitting US president to enter the DPRK [when he briefly crossed the intra-Korean border](#) inside the DMZ with Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae In. [During an October election debate with Trump](#), Biden called Kim a "thug" and compared him to German fascist leader Adolf Hitler. He claimed Trump's conciliatory approach had "legitimized" the DPRK and promised only to meet with Kim if he agreed to reduce the North Korean nuclear arsenal prior to the summit.

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Former Co-Worker Reportedly Says Alleged Nashville Bomber Had Anti-Cop History
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Anthony Quinn Warner, a 63-year-old Nashville, Tennessee, resident, was the sole fatality of the detonation of his RV in the city's downtown area. The blast injured at least eight other individuals and damaged dozens of buildings, including an AT&T transmission building housing connection points for regional internet and wireless communications.

As federal authorities attempt to piece together the events leading up to the Christmas Day bombing in Nashville, Tom Lundborg, a former co-worker of the accused bomber, [told the Daily Beast on Monday](#) that Warner had a love for marijuana and dislike for authority when he was employed as a technician for A.C.E. Alarms in the 1970s.

"I worked with Tony as his helper. I kind of looked up to him. He was kind of a hippie. Had long hair, a 'Magnum, P.I.' mustache," Lundborg told The Daily Beast. "He was a smart, cocky kind of guy. I rode around with him all day every day — during the summers, at least for a couple years."

Lundborg detailed that his father, who owned A.C.E. Alarms, would even go out drinking with Warner.

"He was a little guy, the silent type, but nice-looking to girls ... My dad would go to dive bars with him. He was popular with the females in there, you could just tell," he said.

Lundborg also revealed that he has already spoken to the Federal Bureau of Investigation about Warner's dislike for law enforcement.

"I hate cops. They're all corrupt," he recounted Warner saying in the '70s. "Never trust a cop." Warner's DNA, as well as a matching ID number for the RV, quickly tied the 63-year-old to the incident. However, a motive for the blast remains unknown.

Prior the explosion, a 15-minute audio warning was played from the vehicle's speakers.

"Obviously, the audio from the vehicle warning people that an explosion was imminent, the opportunity to clear the area, certainly gives you that insight that the possibility was that he had no intention of harming anyone but himself, but that obviously plays into our investigation. It does appear that the intent was more destruction than death," David Rausch, director of the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI), told NBC News' "Today" on Monday.

"That's all still speculation at this point as we continue in our investigation with all of our partners."

"We may never find out the exact reason behind the activity that took place," Rausch added.

While evidence and investigative interviews may provide authorities with possibilities, it will be difficult to define a clear motive with the suspect dead.

Reports from sources familiar with Warner have suggested that the incident could be linked to his possible [disdain for 5G technology](#) or [interest in "lizard people" conspiracy theories](#).

Neighbor Rick Laude [told the Associated Press](#) that he spoke to Warner a few days before the incident and jokingly asked the 63-year-old whether Santa was going to bring him something good for Christmas.

"Oh, yeah, Nashville and the world is never going to forget me," Warner reportedly replied.

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McConnell Presents Bill for \$2,000 Stimulus Checks Tied to Section 230 Repeal, Election Fraud Study

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) struck down an attempt by lawmakers to enlarge previously approved stimulus checks, instead saying that a "process" would be started this week to address the checks, calls to repeal Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act and the idea of a probe into the 2020 election.

[Hours after striking down efforts](#), McConnell introduced a new mash-up bill on Tuesday that would significantly increase federal COVID-19 stimulus checks for struggling Americans to \$2,000.

However, [as part of McConnell's bill](#), Section 230 would be repealed, and a study would be launched to investigate the allegations of voter fraud in the highly contested 2020 presidential election, which US President Donald Trump still has yet to concede.

Section 230, a thorn in Trump's side, offers legal protections to internet companies from the content their users share on their platforms. Trump has repeatedly called for the decades-old legislation to be repealed; however, support for a repeal has not been particularly strong in Congress.

US officials [have already begun to oppose the combo bill](#), as the measure's mention of both the election study and Section 230 greatly hindered the chances of boosting stimulus checks by \$1,400.

"Sen. McConnell knows how to make \$2,000 survival checks reality and he knows how to kill them," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) [told reporters](#). "If Sen. McConnell tries loading up the bipartisan House-passed CASH Act with unrelated, partisan provisions, that will do absolutely nothing to help struggling families across the country."

Schumer later stressed that McConnell's bill "[would be a blatant attempt to deprive Americans of a \\$2,000 survival check](#)."

McConnell's introduction came a few hours after Trump accused Republicans via social media of having a "[death wish](#)" for not approving the check increase, and not opting to present legislation to repeal Section 230 or address his election allegations.

Although the [US House of Representatives passed the check increase on Monday](#), the US Senate isn't likely to take up the measure until after Trump's veto of the 2021 defense bill is overridden in the chamber. McConnell has said the Senate will vote on overriding the veto [on Wednesday](#), though procedural hurdles could delay that action.

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At Least 50 Journalists Killed in 2020, Most Were 'Deliberately Targeted' for Their Work - Watchdog
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Although COVID-19 prompted some journalists to shy away from actively working out in the field, new figures indicate that even amid the devastating pandemic reporters continued to be killed.

A new report released by [watchdog Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)](#) on Tuesday revealed that at least 50 journalists were killed in 2020 as a result of the journalistic work they were conducting at the time.

The annually published report notes that of the murdered individuals, 45 were deemed as professional journalists, four were media workers, and one person was identified as a non-professional journalist.

A total of 42 were "deliberately targeted" in connection with their work as journalists, whereas eight individuals were killed while they were reporting in the field "without being deliberately targeted as journalists."

The top five deadliest countries for journalists were Mexico, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Additionally, the report found that the majority of the reporters (34) were killed in countries

not at war, and that all but one of the journalists were nationals of the country where they were killed.

“This year’s figures confirm a trend that began in 2016 and has become more marked over the past two years: the number of journalists killed in war zones keeps on falling. It is now countries considered to be ‘at peace’ that are proving to be the deadliest for journalists,” the report notes. “In 2020, nearly seven out of every 10 journalists killed (68%) lost their lives in countries ‘at peace,’ whereas in 2016, it was only four out of every ten.”

The watchdog also determined that Mexico “tragically confirmed its position [in 2020] as world leader of the most dangerous countries for the media” after accounting for 10 murdered journalists. Investigators are still trying to determine whether two of those victims were killed for their work.

“For the past five years, Mexico has seen an average of eight to 10 journalists murdered every year. The election of a new president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, exactly two years ago has not alleviated the scourges that plague the country,” reads the report. “The links between drug traffickers and politicians remain, and journalists who dare to cover these or related issues continue to be the targets of barbaric murders.”

Several attacks against journalists in Mexico have been documented throughout the years, with cases involving drug cartels taking center stage. The RSF report highlights two severe cases that saw [journalist Julio Valdivia Rodríguez beheaded](#) and [editor Víctor Fernando Álvarez Chávez](#) murdered and cut into pieces.

Data collected by the Committee to Protect Journalists details that since 1992, at least 125 reporters have been killed in Mexico, [of which at least 53](#) were confirmed to have been killed due to their profession.

RSF’s report examined cases that took place between January 1 and December 15. It states that this year’s tally brings the number of journalists killed over the past 10 years to 937.

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Thousands Left Without Heat, Hot Water in Colorado After Vandals Attack Natural Gas Services by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Local media reports have suggested that an ongoing bid to restore services to thousands of individuals living in the Aspen, Colorado, community has encountered weather-related setbacks due to frigid temperatures and snowfall which are expected to continue throughout Tuesday. Thousands of Coloradans have been left between a rock and a hard place for several days after local law enforcement officials revealed vandalism at three natural gas energy stations had hindered services to customers.

Local natural gas provider Black Hills Energy revealed over the weekend that a coordinated, vandalistic attack took place against three of its sites on Sunday, and that approximately 3,500 users were forced to go without heat or hot water until technicians could return services.

Citing Bill Linn, Aspen's assistant police chief, [the Aspen Times reported](#) that the culprits may have ties to the environmental advocacy organization Earth First! since the group's name was found on one of the damaged pipes.

However, it's worth noting that the group has not taken responsibility for the vandalism, and law enforcement officials have not received any communication from the group in regards to the damages.

Although officials did retrieve evidence from the scenes, such as at least one footprint, none of the three Black Hills Energy locations had security cameras installed.

Linn further explained the vandals "would have had to have some familiarity with [Black Hills Energy's] system" in order to pull off the scheme. He added, "They tampered with flow lines. They turned off gas lines."

Vance Crocker, the vice president of operations for Black Hills Energy Colorado, [said in a Monday statement](#) that bringing the thousands of affected customers back onto the network would take "several steps."

"We must first make sure all gas meters are off, then purge the system so it's ready for the reintroduction of the natural gas supply," Crocker stated, before adding that dozens of technicians would then have to go door-to-door to "relight each customer's gas appliances."

In a Tuesday morning update, Black Hills Energy revealed that officials were able to complete the initial steps of purging and repressurizing its system and had begun to relight appliances for the "most critical customers."

Despite the positive developments, concerns are rising over the incoming snowfall and cold temperatures that are expected to stay in the area over the next couple of days. Forecasts by the [National Weather Service](#) indicate Aspen has a 50% chance of snow showers on Tuesday, with a high temperature of 28 degrees Fahrenheit. At nightfall, temperatures are expected to dip as low as 2 degrees Fahrenheit.

Patti Clapper, the commissioner of Pitkin County who was affected by the outage, described the Sunday incident to the Aspen Times as "an act of terrorism."

"It's trying to destroy a mountain community at the height of the holiday season. This wasn't a national gas glitch. This was a purposeful act," Clapper said. "Someone is looking to make a statement of some kind."

Pitkin County Sheriff Joe DiSalvo, on the other hand, steered away from labeling the incident as an attack, explaining that he saw the setback as more of "an intentional act" aimed at disrupting gas service.

A multi-jurisdictional investigation to determine who is responsible for the vandalism is ongoing and being conducted by the Pitkin County Sheriff's Office, the Aspen Police Department and the FBI.

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Pardon Pitfalls - Political Cartoon

Ahead of his January exit from the White House, US President Donald Trump has recently taken the opportunity to commute various sentences and issue multiple pardons for allies, including former campaign officials George Papadopoulos, Roger Stone and Paul Manafort, among dozens of others.

Michael Cohen, who previously served as Trump's longtime attorney and fixer, remarked late Monday that the multitude of pardons his former boss issued could come back to ruin him if those who received pardons are forced to testify against him.

"This produces a very significant problem for Donald Trump, in the fact that once you get that pardon, you're no longer able to invoke the Fifth Amendment ... because you cannot be charged," Cohen said [during an interview with MSNBC's Ari Melber](#). "All of these people may ultimately be his downfall simply because they'll be testifying against him either for a court or a tribunal."

The Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution protects Americans from being forced to make statements implicating themselves in criminal activity. Incidentally, reports previously emerged that [Cohen had reached out to Trump about a pardon](#) after the 2018 FBI raid on his home and work office, but that the commander-in-chief refused to issue one.

To date, Trump has granted clemency to 70 individuals, 41 of whom were [pardoned for past offenses just last week](#). Political insiders suspect Trump may continue to grant additional pardons to allies such as [lawyer Rudy Giuliani and even his older children](#).

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US Justice Department Declines to Charge Officers Implicated in 2014 Killing of Tamir Rice by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old from Cleveland, Ohio, was killed in 2014, after Officer Timothy Loehmann and his partner, Frank Garmback, responded to reports of a "guy" waving a firearm at people near a local recreational center. Seconds after arriving at the scene, Loehmann fatally shot Rice who had been playing with a pellet gun near the center.

The [US Department of Justice announced on Tuesday](#) that it would close the case into the police-involved shooting death of Rice since the agency had concluded there was insufficient evidence to bring federal criminal charges against both Cleveland officers.

At the center of the case was whether Loehmann had acted unreasonably under the circumstances and had exhibited willful actions during his encounter with Rice at the Ohio park. According to statements from both officers, Loehmann repeatedly ordered Rice to drop the pellet gun, which officers at the time took it to be a real firearm as a result of the [911 dispatcher not telling the pair](#) of the possibility that the reported "guy" was a juvenile, and that the alleged firearm was not a real gun.

However, within seconds of the encounter, Loehmann discharged his firearm and fatally shot Rice in the abdomen. Loehmann and Garmback both maintained that Rice was shot after he appeared to be reaching for the toy gun, which did not have the orange tip that Airsoft pellet guns typically include.

Although [surveillance footage was captured by cameras](#) installed near Cleveland's Cudell Park Recreation Center, investigators ruled that the recording "is grainy, shot from a distance, does not show detail or perspective, and portions of the incident are not visible because of the location of the patrol car."

As such, officials say that they are not clearly able to conclude whether Rice did or did not reach for the toy gun.

Officials stated the footage also includes no audio, which fails to prove whether officials did or did not issue commands, and that since it is a timelapse recording, "there is no foundation to establish the precise timing from image to image."

"Thus, even when the video was enhanced to the still frames, there are unknown time gaps of up to a full second between each frame," reads the department release. "The video and the corresponding still frames are incapable of capturing the nuances of continuous action."

Ultimately, DoJ officials concluded that "the evidence is insufficient to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Officer Loehmann willfully violated Tamir Rice's constitutional rights, or that Officers Loehmann or Garmback obstructed justice."

The agency further indicated that Rice's family was informed of their ruling on Monday, and that an explanation into the decision was provided on Tuesday to their legal representatives.

A grand jury in 2015 refused to indict either Loehmann and Garmback on criminal charges.

Loehmann was fired from the Cleveland Police Department after investigators discovered he was deemed "unfit for duty" during a previous stint with the police force in Independence, Ohio. Garmback was suspended for a period of 10 days for violating tactical rules that stemmed from how he drove onto the site where Rice was killed.

Rice's death on November 22, 2014, came at a time of several high-profile killings by white police officers of black Americans, including that of [Missouri resident Michael Brown](#) and [New York resident Eric Garner](#). Widespread outrage over the killings helped to galvanize the Black Lives Matter movement.

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'Dark Period': New York City Records 41% Increase in Murder for 2020
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The annual homicide total for New York City, New York, has been on the rise for three consecutive years, following a modern-era low of 292 in 2017. As of Tuesday, some 447 murders have so far been logged in the Big Apple for the outgoing year.

Just days before the end of 2020, NYC is observing an over 40% increase in homicides from the previous year, according to a Tuesday [report in the Associated Press](#).

"We're definitely coming out of that dark period," Police Commissioner Dermot Shea told the outlet. "The confluence of COVID into the protests into all of the debate about defunding the police — I can't imagine a darker period."

Protests included anti-racism marches following the [May 25 death of George Floyd](#) and a subsequent "[Defund the Police](#)" movement which seeks to reappropriate a percentage of current police funding to nonpunitive programs that benefit public safety and health.

Related demonstrations and accompanying violence led to US President Donald Trump threatening to send federal agents to NYC over the summer. The US president [and the US Department of Justice](#) later suggested that the city was an "anarchist jurisdiction."

Some argue that the spike in homicides is also related to poverty in the city.

"The coronavirus has had a devastating impact on society in low-income communities, and it just adds to the social disorganization that exists," Samuel Walker, a policing expert and professor emeritus at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, stated to the AP.

A veteran NYPD sergeant assigned to the Lower Manhattan area [told local outlet The City](#) that there are a "combination of things" contributing to the increase of murders and shootings in general.

"There's been so many recent changes with the body cameras and the overzealous supervision of cops. Officers are afraid to do anything because they don't want to make a mistake and get in trouble," he claimed earlier this month.

"They're afraid to stick their neck out to do anything because they don't want to get fired." He also noted that the amount of arrests, as of mid-December, amounted to some 134,000 versus 207,759 arrests recorded in 2019.

Alex Vitale, coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College, argued that the increase in killings and other crime can be traced to COVID-19 pandemic.

"Why has there been an increase in shootings? It's pretty closely correlated with the onset of COVID. Especially the period right after the most intensive lockdowns. So I think what we're seeing here is a response to a deep, deep level of sort of social and economic instability and insecurity," he suggested.

"That's creating a tremendous amount of stress in already stressed communities. And some of that is getting expressed as interpersonal violence."

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Biden Urges US Congress to Provide More Funds for COVID-19 Treatment, Reopening Efforts

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden urged Congress to provide additional funds to fund COVID-19 treatment as well as reopening efforts.

"All these - vaccination, testing, protecting gears - require more funding from Congress more than we just approved," Biden told reporters on Tuesday.

Biden promised to propose a "COVID-19 action package" early next year and called on Congress to act on it quickly.

He emphasized that such efforts will require tens of millions of dollars, given that different institutions need additional funding to maintain health safety, Biden said.

"Schools need funding for testing, more funding for transportation, so students can maintain social distance on buses, for school buildings, for additional cleaning services, protective equipment," Biden added.

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California Extends Stay-at-Home Orders for 2 Regions - Public Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - California is extending the stay-at-home orders for another three weeks in two regions where hospital intensive-care capacity has been overrun by COVID-19 cases, the California Department of Public Health said in a statement.

"The stay-at-home orders for San Joaquin Valley and Southern California are being extended," the California Public Health said via Twitter. "We must continue to do our part to protect each other by engaging in fewer activities with fewer people, keeping masks on anytime you leave the house, and staying home."

The order takes effect when a region has less than 15 percent intensive care bed availability. According to US media reports, San Joaquin Valley and Southern California currently had no availability for ICU beds. California's Bay Area and Greater Sacramento are similarly under stay-at-home orders.

The restrictions require the affected regions to temporarily close bars, wineries, personal services, hair salons and barbershops. Gatherings are disallowed, but when permitted require "100 percent masking and physical distancing."

California has reported an average of 100.5 coronavirus cases per 100,000 people over the past seven days to Monday that represents the highest rate in the United States.

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Yaroshenko's Defense Will Respond to US Opposition to Early Release By January 4 - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The legal defense team of Russian national Konstantin Yaroshenko, who is currently jailed at the Danbury correctional facility in Connecticut, will respond to the US government's opposition for his early release by January 4, Yaroshenko's lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik.

"On January 4, 2021, we will respond, we will reference the most current count of COVID-19 infections at FCI Danbury, which are rising at present," Tarasov said after Acting US Attorney for the Southern District of New York Audrey Strauss submitted opposition to Yaroshenko's motion for a compassionate release.

Tarasov noted the US Attorney's office contends that Yaroshenko's medical condition does not warrant an early release.

"The government argued that the motion should be denied based on the severity of the crime," he said.

Tarasov also pointed out that Yaroshenko has served more than ten years of his 20 year sentence.

"The sentencing guidelines called for a sentence greater than 20 years, nonetheless the statutory minimum in this case was ten years in jail and Yaroshenko has already fulfilled at least the statutory minimum. So, legally, there is a way for the court to release Yaroshenko and impose a sentence that is not less than a statutory minimum," he said.

On December 19, Yaroshenko's legal defense filed a motion for a compassionate release on health grounds. At the time, Tarasov told Sputnik that Yaroshenko suffers from hypertension, hyperlipidemia and arthritis, which the US health authorities have characterized as severe illness in case an individual contracts the novel coronavirus.

Yaroshenko was arrested in Liberia in May 2010 on suspicion of drug trafficking. A year later, he was extradited to the United States and sentenced to 20 years in prison for allegedly taking part in a conspiracy to smuggle a large amount of drugs into the country. Yaroshenko has denied all charges.

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US State Dept. Approves Sale of 3,000 Bombs to Saudi Arabia - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US State Department said in a statement that it has approved a possible sale of 3,000 small diameter bombs to Saudi Arabia in a deal worth of \$290 million.

"The [State Department's] Defense Security Cooperation Agency delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale today," the statement on Tuesday.

The State Department said that Saudi Arabia requested to buy GBU-39 SDB I munitions with containers, support equipment and services, spare and repair parts.

The State Department said the proposed sale will help to improve "the security of a friendly country that continues to be an important force for political stability and economic growth in the Middle East."

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US Justice Dept. Denies Charging Officers in Fatal Shooting of Black Teen Tamir Rice

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US federal prosecutors decided not to bring charges against two police officers involved in the fatal shooting of 12-year-old African American Tamir Rice, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"The Justice Department announced today that the career prosecutors reviewing the independent federal investigation into the fatal shooting of Tamir Rice on Nov. 22, 2014, in Cleveland, Ohio, found insufficient evidence to support federal criminal charges against Cleveland Division of Police (CDP) Officers Timothy Loehmann and Frank Garmback," the release said on Tuesday.

In November 2014, Loehmann and Garmback shot and killed 12-year-old Rice, who was playing in a park with a toy gun. Rice's killing was recorded on video that was later released and caused widespread condemnation and protests throughout the United States.

The release added that on Monday the Justice Department notified Rice's attorneys of its decision and on Tuesday sent a letter to Rice's family explaining the findings of its investigations and reasons for its decision to not bring charges against the police officers.

The Justice Department said federal prosecutors were unable to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Loehmann willfully violated Rice's constitutional rights or that the two police officers obstructed justice.

In 2015, a Cuyahoga County grand jury refused to indict the officers involved in Rice's murder, while prosecutors argued the killing was not criminal because the police could not tell if the gun was real.

Following the decision, the city of Cleveland started an administrative process against the officers by creating a review committee to look at the circumstances of the incident.

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US Government Opposes Early Release From Jail of Russian National Yaroshenko

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US government opposes an early release of Russian national Konstantin Yaroshenko, who is currently jailed at the Danbury correctional facility in Connecticut, Acting US Attorney for the Southern District of New York Audrey Strauss said on Tuesday.

"The government respectfully submits this letter in opposition to defendant Konstantin Yaroshenko's motion for a reduction in sentence," Strauss said in a letter to US District Judge Jed Rakoff.

The government called Yaroshenko "an experienced international drug trafficker and accused him of participating in a conspiracy to help distribute large amounts of cocaine.

Strauss highlighted two reasons why the court should deny Yaroshenko's motion.

"First, the defendant has not shown any extraordinary and compelling reason for a reduction in his sentence. Second, even if he had, the factors under Section 3553(a) continue to weigh strongly against a reduction in the defendant's sentence," she said.

On December 19, Yaroshenko filed a motion for a compassionate release on the ground of health. Yaroshenko has several health conditions, including hypertension, hyperlipidemia and arthritis, which the US health authorities have linked to severe illness should an individual contract the novel coronavirus, his lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik.

Yaroshenko was arrested in Liberia in May 2010 on suspicion of drug trafficking. A year later, he was extradited to the United States and sentenced to 20 years in prison for allegedly taking part in a conspiracy to smuggle a large amount of drugs into the country. He has denied all charges.

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Colorado Confirms First Known US Case of COVID-19 Variant Detected in UK - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Colorado has detected the first known US case of the mutated novel coronavirus (COVID-19) variant originally found in the United Kingdom, Governor Jared Polis said in a statement.

"Today we discovered Colorado's first case of the COVID-19 variant B.1.1.7, the same variant discovered in the United Kingdom," Polis said in the statement on Tuesday. "The health and safety of Coloradans is our top priority and we will monitor this case, as well as all COVID-19 indicators, very closely."

The Governor's office said in a separate statement that the patient is a man in his 20s with no travel history and is currently in isolation in Elbert County, Colorado.

The statement said public health officials are doing a thorough investigation into the matter, adding that no close contacts have been identified so far but officials are working to identify other potential cases.

Earlier in December, London announced that a new coronavirus strain was detected in the country, adding that the new variant can be up to 70 percent more transmissible than other SARS-CoV-2 variants. After the news, many countries suspended travel to and from the United Kingdom. There is no evidence that the new strain is more pathogenic.

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US Approves \$4Bln Sale of 8 Apache Helicopters to Kuwait - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US State Department signed off on arms sales to Kuwait worth more than \$4 billion that include eight Apache AH-64E helicopters as well as equipment to upgrade an additional 16 older Apaches, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a press release.

"The government of Kuwait has requested to buy eight (8) AH-64E Apache Longbow Attack Helicopters and remanufacture sixteen (16) of their AH-64D Apache Longbow Attack Helicopters to the AH-64E configuration consisting of: eight (8) AH-64E Apache Helicopters (new procurement); sixteen (16) AH-64E Apache Helicopters (remanufacture)," the release said on Tuesday. "The total estimated cost is \$4.0 billion."

A separate DSCA release announced State Department approval of a proposed \$200 million sale of spare parts for the Kuwait's upgraded Patriot missile defense system.

The DSCA said both sales will support the foreign policy and national security of the United States by helping to improve the security of a major non-NATO ally that is an important force for political stability and economic progress in the Middle East.

The principal contractors for the Apache agreement include Boeing, Lockheed Martin, General Electric, Raytheon and Longbow, while DSCA named Raytheon as the primary supplier of equipment for the Patriot missile defense system.

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US Approves Sale of Aircraft Defense System to Egypt for \$104Mln - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The State Department signed off on a potential \$104 million sale of aircraft infrared countermeasures to Egypt plus a separate \$64.6 million sale of advanced sniper targeting pods, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in separate announcements.

"The Government of Egypt has requested to buy one (1) AN/AAQ-24(V)N Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures (LAIRCM) system to protect one (1) Airbus 340-200 Head-of-State aircraft," a DSCA press release said on Tuesday. "The estimated total cost is \$104 million.

The self-protection suite will improve the survivability of the Airbus airplane that serves as Egypt's equivalent of US Air Force One, which transports the US president and contractor Northrop Grumman will supply the equipment, the release said.

In a separate release, DSCA said the State Department approved the sale of Sniper Advanced Targeting Pods and related equipment to Egypt for an estimated cost of \$65.6 and Lockheed Martin was designated as the primary contractor, the release added.

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Biden Says Will Use Emergency Powers to Boost Coronavirus Vaccines Production

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden vowed to invoke the Defense Production Act to boost the supply of coronavirus vaccines and protective equipment needed to mitigate the spread of the virus in the United States.

"I am going to use my power under the Defense Production Act, when I am sworn in, and order private industry to accelerate making of the materials needed for the vaccines as well as protective gear," Biden told reporters on Tuesday.

President Donald Trump has twice resorted to the Defense Production Act, which grants the president broad powers to increase the manufacturing of critical items in times of emergency. In March, Trump invoked the Defense Production Act to accelerate the output of ventilators and also in April to keep meat processing plants open amid reported coronavirus cases among workers.

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US Military Deploys Personnel to 4 California Hospitals Fighting COVID-19 - NORTHCOM

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US military dispatched 75 soldiers and airmen from the state of Texas to join personnel fighting COVID-19 at four California hospitals, Northern Command (NORTHCOM) said in a press release.

"This week, approximately 65 US Air Force military personnel, including doctors, nurses and others from the 60th Medical Group, Travis Air Force Base, California, part of COVID Theater Hospital 1, and ten US Army nurses from the 627th Hospital Center, Fort Carson, Colorado, part of Urban Augmentation Medical Task Force 627, will begin providing support to four hospitals in California," the release said on Tuesday.

Approximately 100 military medical personnel are currently working alongside civilian healthcare providers, helping treat COVID-19 patients in the states of North Dakota, Wisconsin and the Navajo Nation territories in the southwest of the United States, the release added.

In recent weeks, Californian authorities have reported more than 2 million residents testing positive for the coronavirus some 24,500 virus-related deaths, John Hopkins University reported on earlier on Tuesday.

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US Army Medical Center to Participate in COVID-19 Vaccine Phase 3 Clinical Trial- Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US Army Womack Medical Center in the state of North Carolina will participate in the Phase 3 clinical trial of evaluating how safe and effective is the Novavax vaccine candidate against the novel coronavirus, the Defense Department said in a statement.

"This location has been identified to participate in the Phase 3 clinical trial evaluating the safety and efficacy of the Novavax vaccine candidate NVX-CoV2373," the statement said on Tuesday. On Monday, the US biotechnology company Novavax announced that it will start a Phase 3 trial of its coronavirus vaccine candidate in the United States and Mexico. Almost 30,000 volunteers in more than 100 cities in both countries will participate in the trial, and two-thirds of the participants will receive an active vaccine.

"We are extraordinarily appreciative of volunteers who are willing to roll up their sleeves and help fight this pandemic," vaccine development lead for Operation Warp Speed Matt Hepburn said. "That same spirit of volunteerism is the foundation of military service."

Hepburn called the clinical trials an essential step in assessing the effectiveness of vaccines. The Defense Department noted in the statement that the Womack Medical Center is its sixth facility participating in conducting vaccine trials.

Novavax is the fifth company to launch a Phase 3 trial for a coronavirus vaccine in the United States after Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZenca and Johnson & Johnson.

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Biden Says Will Speed Up Distribution of Coronavirus Vaccines Across US

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden said he has spoken to numerous state and local officials about speeding up the delivery of coronavirus vaccines across the United States.

"Vice President [elect Kamala] Harris and I have been speaking with county officials, mayors, governors of both parties to speed up a distribution of the vaccines across the nation," Biden told reporters on Tuesday.

Biden repeated his commitment to accelerate the vaccination to 100 million shots by the end of his first 100 days in office, equaling approximately 1 million shots per day.

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Biden Warns It Could Take 'Years' to Vaccinate All Americans if Current Pace Proceeds

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The current pace of COVID-19 vaccinations in the United States indicates that it could take years, instead of months, to inoculate all Americans from the virus, US President-elect Joe Biden said.

"We've only vaccinated few million [people] so far, and the pace the vaccination program is moving now, as it continues to move, it's going to take years not months to vaccinate the American people," Biden said in his Tuesday address.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik)

SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS

* Russian observers in the commission monitoring the Syrian ceasefire recorded 20 violations of the truce in the past 24-hour period, while Turkish observers reported none, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.

* A Russian military police personnel carrier in Idlib was fired at from an area under the control of pro-Turkish militants and three Russian soldiers were slightly injured, Rear Adm. Vyacheslav Sytnik, deputy head of the Russian center for the reconciliation of warring parties in Syria, said.

RUSSIA-BELARUS TALKS

* Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin and his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu discussed over the telephone joint measures to ensure security of the Union State, the Belarusian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.

* Belarus has reached an agreement with Russia on oil and gas deliveries for the next year on favorable terms, Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko said.

EARTHQUAKE IN CROATIA

* A 6.3 magnitude earthquake rocked Croatia on Tuesday, the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre said.

* The earthquake has caused injuries and one fatality and districts in the capital Zagreb remain without electricity, local media reported.

RUSSIA ON ARMS CONTROL

* Russia is ready for further arms control negotiations with the United States but it is too early to say anything about specific parameters yet, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in an interview with Sputnik.

* Russia hopes that the administration of US President-elect Joe Biden will have a realistic approach to arms control, including on verification of agreements, Lavrov said.

* Russia does not demand a renewal of the Open Skies Treaty, it only wants to have legal guarantees of its implementation, Lavrov said.

* The extension of the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty for a maximum possible period serves the interests of both Russia, the United States and the global community, and there are chances of extending the deal in February if the new Biden administration fulfills its promise to not hold the agreement hostage to their ambitions, Lavrov said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

* The supply of Russian vaccine Sputnik V to the United States and Europe will be limited due to geopolitics, Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) CEO Kirill Dmitriev said.

* Venezuela has signed a contract with Russia to vaccinate 10 million people with the Sputnik V vaccine and expects to start vaccinating the population as soon as possible, Vice President Delsy Rodriguez told reporters.

* Russia and Turkey are successfully cooperating on the Sputnik V vaccine as they discuss joint production and export, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said.

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Trump Presses Senate Republicans to Support \$2,000 Stimulus Payments

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump on Tuesday stepped up calls on Republicans to approve \$2,000 coronavirus stimulus handouts, repeal a law that protects big tech companies and stop alleged election fraud after the Senate leader promised the chamber would take up the three issues this week.

Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell earlier on Tuesday said the Senate would this week "begin a process" to address the three priorities.

"Unless Republicans have a death wish, and it is also the right thing to do, they must approve the \$2000 payments ASAP. \$600 IS NOT ENOUGH!" Trump tweeted. "Don't let Big Tech steal our Country, and don't let the Democrats steal the Presidential Election. Get tough!"

On Monday, the Democratic-led House of Representatives approved a bill to increase stimulus payments from \$600, originally envisaged by the lawmakers, to \$2,000 per taxpayer and passed it to the Senate.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell did not schedule a vote for the legislation, but said that the chamber would consider bigger payments, a repeal of Section 230 and election integrity measures.

Although Trump's administration has authorized the transition to President-elect Joe Biden's administration, the incumbent refuses to concede and disputes the validity of the election, accusing his rivals of massive fraud.

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International Medical Services in CAR Reduced Due to Security Risks - Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - International humanitarian medical services have been reduced in the Central African Republic (CAR) due to the risk of violence after the recent elections there, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said in a statement on Tuesday.

"While the vast majority of the international medical humanitarian organization's services in the country continued to be provided after the election, some activities have had to be reduced or suspended due to the significant increase in security risks for patients and staff," the statement said.

Tensions flared up in the CAR a week before the presidential and legislative elections that were held on Sunday. Violence occurred amid the ongoing conflict between the forces backing incumbent President Faustin Archange Touadera and supporters of former President Francois Bozize.

MSF said in the statement that medical teams remain in the nation's capital of Bangui and are mobilized to deliver critical humanitarian health care aid to the population.

"MSF calls on all armed actors to allow health care workers to provide timely medical care, to respect their obligations to protect civilians and humanitarian workers," the statement added.

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Three Central American Nations Sign Asylum Agreement With US - Homeland Security Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The three nations of the so-called Central American triangle signed an agreement with the United States to control the exodus of asylum seekers, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras have all signed the Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA) and all three ACAs have entered into force," the release said. "Through the implementation of the ACAs, the Northern Triangle countries and the United States reaffirm their commitment to combating mutual threats, including transnational criminal organizations and gangs, migrant smuggling, drug trafficking, and human trafficking."

The Asylum Cooperative Agreement, first announced in September 2019 and finalized earlier this month, is similar to so called safe-third-country deals that the Trump administration sought with several Latin American nations.

During an immigration crisis in 2018-19, migrants from Central America crossed the US-Mexican border at rates of more than 100,000 per month, according to media reports.

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Fear of Bursting Stock Market Bubble Hits 61% of Adults in US - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Recession fears expressed by 61 percent of adults in the United States reflect nervousness over a recent rise of US stock markets to record levels, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Tuesday.

"[The poll] survey finds that 61 percent of American Adults are at least somewhat concerned that the stock market bubble will burst and push the economy back into recession with 23 percent who are Very Concerned. Twenty-five percent don't share that fear, but that includes only seven percent (7 percent) who are Not at All Concerned," a press release explaining the poll said.

Despite widespread economic anxiety, 32 percent of Americans say they expect the market to be higher in a year, and 20 percent expect markets to lose value, the release added.

Analysts expect the Standard & Poor's index to close the year more than 15 percent higher than 12 months earlier while the Nasdaq Composite Index could close with gains exceeding 40 percent, according to media reports.

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McConnell Says US Senate Will Vote to Override Trump Veto of Defense Bill Wednesday

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The US Senate will vote on Wednesday to override President Donald Trump's veto of the fiscal year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said during remarks on the Senate floor on Tuesday.

"Yesterday, a bipartisan supermajority in the House voted to re-approve the conference report of this must-pass legislation," McConnell said. "Today, the Senate will set up a final vote for tomorrow, Wednesday, for this chamber to follow suit."

McConnell urged his colleagues in the Senate to support passing the NDAA.

On Monday, the House of Representatives voted 322-87 to override Trump's veto of the NDAA. McConnell did not schedule a vote for the bill to increase stimulus payments from \$600 to \$2,000, but he mentioned the Senate this week would "begin a process" to consider the legislation along with other policies Trump wants to change, including the repeal of Section 230, which protects tech companies from liability for restricting or censoring third-party content online.

McConnell blocked Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer's effort to hold an immediate vote on the legislation to increase the stimulus payments.

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US Urges China to Release Immediately Citizen Journalist Zhang Zhan - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is urging China to release right away from detention citizen journalist Zhang Zhan, who has been a subject of persecution and a sham conviction, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in a statement on Tuesday.

"The United States strongly condemns the People's Republic of China's (PRC) sham prosecution and conviction of citizen journalist Zhang Zhan on December 28. We call on the PRC government to release her immediately and unconditionally," Pompeo said.

On Monday, a Shanghai court sentenced Zhang to four years in prison on charges of disseminating information that provokes conflict.

Pompeo said the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has shown once again that it will do whatever it takes to silence those who question its official line, even regarding crucial public health information concerning the spread of the novel coronavirus pandemic in China and beyond.

"Lying is a feature, not a bug of authoritarian regimes. The CCP restricted and manipulated information about the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan from the start and brutally silenced other brave truth-tellers, such as Dr. Li Wenliang, Chen Qiushi, and Fang Bin," he said.

Pompeo noted that the world relied on uncensored coverage of citizen journalists like Zhang to understand the true situation regarding the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan and the brutal measures implemented to stop its spread.

"Her hasty trial, to which foreign observers were denied access, shows how fearful the CCP is of Chinese citizens who speak the truth," he said. "The PRC government's fear of transparency and its ongoing repression of fundamental freedoms are a sign of weakness, not strength, and a threat to all of us. The United States will always support the right of Chinese citizens to express themselves freely and peacefully."

Zhang covered the coronavirus outbreak from Wuhan in February, exposing the methods employed by the Chinese authorities to contain its spread as well as the state of affairs in local hospitals.

Zhang has been held at a detention center in Shanghai's Pudong district since mid-May. In June, she started to refuse to take any food to protest her arrest.

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US Vice President-Elect Harris Gets Vaccinated for Coronavirus

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US Vice President-elect Kamala Harris on Tuesday received the coronavirus vaccine at the United Medical Center in Washington, DC on live television.

"I want to thank United Medical Center in Washington, DC for the work that you do in southeast DC, serving our community that is often overlooked," Harris said. "So, it is good to be here and I've now been vaccinated."

Harris said she received the Moderna vaccine - one of the two coronavirus vaccines that are authorized in the United States - and encouraged Americans to get vaccinated.

"I want to encourage everyone to get the vaccine. It is relatively painless, it happens very quickly, it is safe," Harris said, adding that she looks forward to getting the second dose.

Last Monday, US President-elect Joe Biden received his first dose of the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine, also on live television, to assure Americans of its safety.

The Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are both administered in two shots with a required interval of several weeks between them.

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737 MAX Aircraft Takes Off for First Flight in US Skies Since Grounding

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - American Airlines flew the first flight of Boeing's 737 MAX on Tuesday after 20 months of the jet's grounding by US aviation authorities in response to two fatal crashes.

American Airlines Flight 718 took off from Miami International Airport at 10:30 a.m. ET (15:30 GMT) for New York's LaGuardia Airport, broadcast coverage showed. Brazil's airline Gol had previously resumed flights of the 737 MAX earlier in December.

The US Federal Aviation Administration allowed the airplane to fly again last month, after grounding it nearly two years following crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia that killed 346 passengers and crew. All 737 MAX aircraft were grounded until manufacturer Boeing fixed the existing technical problems that led to the two crashes.

Airlines in the United States, including Alaska, have announced plans to gradually re-introduce the plane to commercial service in the first quarter of 2021.

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US COVID-19 Deaths Could Surge Further in January After Deadliest Month Yet - Fauci

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) – The United States could see yet another surge of COVID-19 deaths in January after witnessing its deadliest month yet since the start of the pandemic this December, top US health official Dr. Anthony Fauci said on Tuesday.

The current month, according to data from Johns Hopkins University's COVID-19 tracker, has already set a record with more than 68,600 confirmed virus-related deaths out of 335,000 reported in the US since the beginning of the pandemic.

“That is what we're concerned about — that in addition to the surge, we're going to have an increase superimposed upon that surge, which could make January even worse than December,” Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases, told CNN. “The surge has gotten out of control in many respects.”

With numbers that high “it really is very difficult” to do effective identification, isolation and contact tracing, forcing to rely on general public health recommendations instead, he said. Fauci urged Americans to limit their social activities for the ongoing Christmas and New Year season.

“We try to get people to just tone down the travel. Those who have already done the travel the thing to do now is to try not to congregate with large numbers of people in social settings like dinners, try to keep it restricted to the immediate family and the immediate household,” he said. Despite experts' warnings not to travel during the holidays, more than 1.28 million people were screened at airports across the country on Sunday, setting a record unseen since the outbreak of the pandemic, according to the Transportation Security Administration.

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US Citizens Rank Trump as Most Admired Man of 2020 - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump for the first time edged out former President Barack Obama as the most admired man in America, a new Gallup poll showed on Tuesday.

"Trump tied former President Barack Obama for the honor last year but edged out his predecessor this year. Trump's first-place finish ends a 12-year run as most admired man for Obama, tied with Dwight Eisenhower for the most ever," Gallup said in a press release.

When asked without any prompting who they regard as the most admired man, 18 percent of respondents named Trump, while 15 percent picked Obama, 6 percent chose President-elect Joe Biden and 3 percent selected top US health official Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Gallup noted in the release that Trump's support among Republicans remains strong at 48 percent, with no other man gaining more than 2 percent of the party's support. Meanwhile Democrats' support for Obama declined from 41 percent last year to 32 percent this year, as party members split their votes,, with 13 percent naming Biden and 5 percent picking Fauci as the most admired man.

Independents were evenly split between Trump and Obama at 11 percent, while 3 percent named Biden and 2 percent picked Fauci.

Gallup pointed out that the incumbent president has topped the list 60 times out of the 74 times that the open-ended poll has been conducted since 1946.

As for the most admired woman, Michele Obama once again topped this year's list. Overall, 10 percent of Americans named the former first lady, followed by Vice President-elect Kamala