

Wednesday 12/30/20

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Video: US Officer Caught on Camera Repeatedly Punching Police Dog
by [Mary F.](#)

Cruelty to animals, or animal abuse, refers to the infliction of harm by humans on animals. According to the Humane Society, the most common victims of animal abuse include dogs, cats, horses and livestock, and it is prevalent in the factory farm industry.

Police in the Northern California city of Vacaville are investigating one of their own officers after a video surfaced on Facebook Monday showing an officer punching a K-9 dog during a training exercise.

In the video clip, an unidentified officer is seen punching his K-9 partner while the dog is pinned between his legs near a warehouse on Vaca Valley Parkway. The officer stays on top of the dog during the video and appears to be looking around toward the end of the footage.

Witness Robert Palomino, who recorded the footage, [told SF Gate](#) that the officer [punched the dog](#) repeatedly until he noticed that Palomino was watching him.

"I heard a dog crying, when I looked, the officer was punching the dog over and over and got shocked about it," Palomino is reported as saying in his Facebook post. "I'm sure he saw me, he stopped beating the dog when he saw me and went behind those trailers in the video."

"I just hope the dog's OK and is removed from him, gets a better partner at least," Palomino [told the Vacaville Reporter](#).

"I was shocked. It got me completely confused. Never seen anything like that before," Palomino added. "He was beating his partner, his coworker, his best friend."

The Vacaville Police Department is currently investigating the incident but has not identified the officer or dog involved.

"We understand how disturbing the video appears to many who view it and the range of emotions it creates. What the video doesn't show is the moments prior, when the canine became aggressive towards his handler," the department said in a Facebook post. "We want to assure the public this incident is being evaluated in its entirety and will be investigated appropriately."

Police Capt. Matt Lydon told the Vacaville Reporter that the officer being investigated had been training with the dog for three to four months before the incident occurred.

According to Lydon, the dog was rewarded with a toy by the officer after successfully completing a narcotics search exercise. However, when the officer tried to take the toy back, the dog acted aggressively.

"That angered the dog. It lunges at him and attempts to bite him," Lydon told the Reporter.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Three Moderna Vaccine Shipments to Texas Held Back From Distribution Due to Temperature Issues

by [Mary F.](#)

Earlier this month, American biotechnology company Moderna announced that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had authorized its vaccine in the US. Under this emergency use authorization, the messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccine can now be distributed to people aged 18 years or older in the US.

Three shipments of Moderna's vaccine were delayed from distribution after it was discovered that they may not have maintained a stable temperature before arriving in Texas last week, [Bloomberg first reported](#).

The three vaccine shipments were originally supposed to be delivered ahead of Christmas. However, it's unclear how many total doses were affected by the temperature issue. The federal government has already replaced the shipments, the outlet also reported.

The Texas Department of State Health Services has also noted that the vaccine delays have created the perception that a small number of vaccine doses have been administered, although that is not the case, Bloomberg reported.

"Some of the shipments for week 2 were delayed and were not received by providers until Monday and Tuesday of this week," health department spokeswoman Lara Anton told Bloomberg.

Problems with data systems used by hospitals to track shots given might also make the progress of vaccination seem slower than it really is.

"It'll look like there's [a] vaccine sitting on the shelf when it's actually been administered," added Carrier Kroll, vice president of advocacy, quality and public health at the Texas Hospital Association.

The Texas incident is not the first obstacle that the US has faced in its efforts to vaccinate 20 million Americans by the end of the year.

Earlier this month, 50 vials of the Moderna vaccine had to be disposed of at the Advocate Aurora Health medical center in Grafton, Wisconsin, after a hospital employee failed to return the vials to a storage freezer.

"We learned that about 50 vials of Moderna vaccine were inadvertently removed from a pharmacy refrigerator overnight," an Advocate Aurora spokesperson [told TMJ4 at the time](#).

"While some of the vaccine was administered to team members on December 26 within the approved 12-hour post-refrigeration window, unfortunately, most of it had to be discarded due to the temperature storage requirements necessary to maintain its viability."

According to the [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), the vaccine must be stored at temperatures between negative 13 degrees Fahrenheit and 5 degrees Fahrenheit.

In an email to [NPR](#), vaccine researcher Margaret Liu explained that the Moderna vaccine must be frozen to ensure that the mRNA, which gives instructions to cells to make a piece of the spike protein of the coronavirus, remains stable. The spike protein is found on the surface of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, and is used by the pathogen to enter cells.

"Everything happens more slowly as you lower the temperature," Liu explained.

"So your chemical reactions — the enzymes that break down RNA — are going to happen more slowly," Liu added.

The US government [has already purchased 200 million doses](#) of the Moderna vaccine so far.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

GOP Lawmaker Says 100 Republicans Could Challenge Electoral College Results
by [Mary F.](#)

Earlier this month, the Electoral College decisively confirmed that Joe Biden is the next American president, giving him a majority of 306 electoral votes to US President Donald Trump's 232. However, Trump and his allies have continued to contest the election results by making claims of widespread voter fraud.

In an interview with [The Bulwark Podcast](#), Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) on Wednesday told host Charlie Sykes that he thinks as many as 100 Republicans could challenge the Electoral College results when Congress meets to count the votes on January 6.

"I hope I'm wrong," noted Kinzinger, an outspoken critic of Trump's allegations of voter fraud. In addition, Kinzinger revealed that he spoke to a lawmaker from a Republican-leaning district who expressed worry about their reelection prospects if they did not come out against the Electoral College results.

"It's like the Texas briefing, right? They knew that it wasn't going anywhere, but it was much easier to just sign your name and be done with it than actually defend it," the Illinois representative said, referring to the fact that earlier this month, Republican Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton [filed a lawsuit](#) attempting to block presidential electors in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin from casting their votes for Biden.

"I'm just over the undermining of democracy and the frankly massive damage that's being done with this," Kinzinger said during the interview.

Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) on Wednesday [revealed that](#) he would challenge the Electoral College vote early next month.

"I cannot vote to certify the Electoral College results on January 6 without raising the fact that some states, particularly Pennsylvania, failed to follow their own state election laws," Hawley said in a statement.

"And I cannot vote to certify without pointing out the unprecedented effort of mega corporations, including Facebook and Twitter, to interfere in this election, in support of Joe Biden. At the very least, Congress should investigate allegations of voter fraud and adopt measures to secure the integrity of our elections. But Congress has so far failed to act," Hawley added.

Also on Wednesday, Rep. Jefferson Van Drew (R-NJ) revealed he would not vote to certify the Electoral College results.

"I won't be voting to certify the electors," Van Drew told [The Press of Atlantic City](#). "It's what I've talked about all along. There has been ... a disrespect of millions of Americans who really do believe that something's wrong. It's not a matter of who would win or lose — maybe the results would be the same — but we should abide by the rule of law."

Trump called for Republican Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp's resignation on Wednesday for refusing to agree with the president's claim that he carried Georgia in the November election. Trump [lost by 12,000 votes](#) in the state.

"[Kemp] should resign from office," [tweeted Trump](#), who has refused to concede his presidential defeat. "He is an obstructionist who refuses to admit that we won Georgia, BIG! Also won the other Swing States."

Trump and his allies are attempting to overturn the election results on January 6, when a joint session of Congress is set to confirm Biden's victory according to the procedures established by the Electoral Count Act of 1887, which minimizes the involvement of Congress in electoral disputes.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden to Nominate Think Tank VP Kathleen Hicks as First Woman Deputy Pentagon Chief by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While US President-elect Joe Biden has positioned his forthcoming administration as more diverse and progressive than ever before, the figures he has picked to fill Cabinet and other senior positions continue to boast deep national security state and corporate ties.

Biden's transition team announced Wednesday Biden would nominate Kathleen Hicks to be the US Defense Department's second-in-command. Hicks will be the first woman to hold the position if confirmed. He also said longtime aide Colin Kahl would be his pick for under secretary of defense for policy, a third-most powerful position in the Pentagon.

"These respected, accomplished civilian leaders will help lead the Department of Defense with integrity and resolve, safeguard the lives and interests of the American people, and ensure that we fulfill our most sacred obligation: to equip and protect those who serve our country, and to care for them and their families both during and after their service," [Biden said in a statement](#).

"Dr. Kath Hicks and Dr. Colin Kahl have the broad experience and crisis-tested judgment necessary to help tackle the litany of challenges we face today, and all those we may confront tomorrow".

Hicks has been leading Biden's Pentagon transition team and has served in several Pentagon positions in the past, including as deputy under secretary of defense for strategy, plans and forces and later as principal deputy under secretary of defense for policy, both under former US President Barack Obama, to whom Biden was vice president.

"It would be a privilege to return to the Pentagon as Deputy Secretary of Defense and work alongside" Lloyd Austin, Colin Kahl "and the incredible DoD total workforce to advance the Biden-Harris administration's defense priorities," she tweeted Wednesday.

However, her position as Number 2 behind Austin, a retired US Army general and former US Central Command chief, will be somewhat awkward. While serving as a witness for Democratic lawmakers at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on whether to grant a waiver to James Mattis, a retired US Marine Corps general whom Trump had nominated as secretary of defense, [Hicks spoke out against allowing recently retired generals](#) to head the Pentagon, a

position traditionally occupied by civilians. However, she supported a waiver for Mattis as a “rare, generational” exception. Austin seeks the same waiver now as was granted to Mattis in 2017.

Presently, Hicks is the senior vice president, Henry A. Kissinger Chair and director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a hawkish Washington, DC, think tank that has fanned the flames of US conflict with China, Russia, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Iran, Venezuela and more.

For example, [in 2017, Hicks co-authored a report warning](#) that many Western governments weren’t properly positioned to oppose “Russia’s rebellion against Western-prescribed rules, norms and values,” and in January of 2018, she sat on the advisory board behind the Trump administration’s National Defense Strategy Report. [The review announced a fundamental shift](#) in US geopolitical strategy, noting the Pentagon’s conclusion that “inter-state strategic competition” with Russia and China, “not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security.”

Kahl boasts similarly impressive security state ties. Assigned to review the National Security Council for Biden’s transition team, he was also deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East during the first Obama administration and later became Biden’s national security adviser from 2014 to 2017. He is presently Steven C. Hazy Senior Fellow at Stanford University and co-director of the university’s Center for International Security and Cooperation.

According to an unnamed [Biden transition team official who spoke with The Hill](#), Kahl worked closely with Austin while the latter was Central Command chief from 2013 to 2016, traveling to Iraq 16 times amid the US’ war against Daesh.

Some of Biden’s [other historic picks for his administration include](#) his vice president, Kamala Harris, who will be the first woman, first Black person and first South Asian person to hold the position; Rep. Deb Haaland (D-NM), who would be the first Native American secretary of the interior; [Pete Buttigieg, who as transportation secretary](#) would be the first openly gay Cabinet member; [Neera Tanden, who would be the first woman of color](#) and first South Asian person to lead the Office of Management and Budget; and Austin, who would be the first Black secretary of defense. He is also [rumored to be considering Darrell Blocker](#) as the first Black CIA director.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Algerian MP Proposes Bill to Ban Promotion of Israel Normalization Talks in Mass Media
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

[380](#)

Subscribe

After Morocco agreed to normalize relations with Israel, other Maghrebi nations came out against the deal and promised not to follow suit. However, several former Tunisian officials in particular have accused Algiers of “playing with fire,” and thus forcing Rabat into the deal. An Algerian lawmaker has proposed a bill that would prohibit promoting the normalization of ties with Israel in Algerian media. The move comes after neighbor Morocco became the latest Arab nation to agree to a peace deal with Israel earlier this month - a trend Algiers has denounced.

On Sunday, Amira Selim, a member of the Algerian Parliament from the Democratic National Rally party, [announced her intention to introduce the bill](#).

“This law is based on the positions of the Algerian state that rejects normalization with the Zionist entity, especially since normalization seriously affected the issue of Western Sahara through political bargaining, with commercial justifications and suspicious deals,” [Selim wrote on Facebook](#). “Because this normalization has begun to spread a social split around it due to anonymous opinions and the spread of false news, especially on social media platforms, it is necessary to protect the Algerian citizen and enlighten the public opinion that this issue falls within the circle of prohibitions, and it affects Algerian unchangeable positions towards the Palestinian issue”.

Selim explained that she aims to prevent debates that “would lead to deep ideological differences,” threatening “the public order and the stability of the state and society.” Stability has long been a concern of the Algerian government, which barely survived a catastrophic civil war from 1991 to 2002 that killed an estimated 200,000 Algerians. For example, former Algerian President [Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who resigned in April 2019](#) amid mass protests, had ruled since 1999.

As other Arab nations have agreed to US-brokered peace deals with Israel over the past few months, [Algiers has firmly voiced its opposition and pledged](#) to uphold the 1967 Khartoum Resolution. Also called the “three nos,” Arab League members promised in the wake of the disastrous 1967 Six-Day War with Israel not to make peace with, recognize or negotiate with Israel, which had just seized the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, West Bank from Jordan, and Golan Heights from Syria.

When the United Arab Emirates announced its peace deal with Israel in August, Algerian President [Abdelmadjid Tebboune unequivocally stated Algeria](#) “will not participate in it,” accept it or bless it.

“The Palestine cause is sacred, and we will not give it up,” he added, calling it “the mother of all issues in the Middle East.”

More recently, after Rabat signed its own deal with Jerusalem earlier this month, Algerian Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad warned the move would further destabilize the region.

“Foreign operations are taking place outside our borders with the aim of destabilizing Algeria,” [Djerad said, according to La Patrie](#), adding that Algerians would unite to “face the multiple dangers that threaten our country.”

[As Sputnik reported, the Moroccan monarchy was only](#) convinced to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Palestinian territories by the Trump administration’s agreement to recognize Morocco’s claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara, a territory it has occupied since 1975 but [which has been promised an independence referendum](#) by the United Nations. [Algeria has long supported the Saharawi Polisario Front](#), which is recognized by the United Nations as the legitimate representative of the Saharawi people, who are indigenous to Western Sahara. Algeria’s Tindouf Province is home to more than 100,000 Saharawi refugees.

In the wake of the Morocco deal, several former leading politicians in neighboring Tunisia raised their voices against Algiers. Moncef Marzouki, Tunisia’s first democratically-elected president, [accused Algiers of holding the entire Maghreb hostage](#) by supporting Western Saharan independence, while former Tunisian Foreign Minister [Ahmed Ounaies said Algiers had “played](#)

[with fire](#)” by supporting Polisario “and caused Morocco to accelerate the process of normalizing relations with Israel and the division of the Maghreb region.”

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Jen Psaki: WH to Issue Order Stopping ‘Midnight Regulations’ From Trump Admin on Inauguration Day
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The term "midnight regulations" refers to the practice whereby an outgoing US administration makes last-minute moves to propel its political agenda before an incoming administration takes over.

US President-elect Joe Biden's press secretary-to-be, Jen Psaki, said Wednesday that on January 20, Biden will issue a memorandum blocking outgoing US President Donald Trump from issuing so-called "midnight regulations" on Inauguration Day.

Psaki said that Biden would issue the directive in line with "standard practice" for incoming administrations.

Since the departure of former US President Jimmy Carter from the White House in January 1981, incoming presidents have issued such memoranda in order to prevent last-minute regulatory changes by outgoing administrations seeking to round out their political agendas. In addition, in 1996, Congress acquired its own ability to reverse decisions made by the outgoing president between Election Day and Inauguration Day, if the new president also disapproves of them.

[According to the Congressional Research Service](#), the name comes from the midnight deadline for would-be princess Cinderella, before she transformed back into a commoner in the popular fairy tale.

[Earlier this month, CNN reported a record-breaking](#) number of rule changes by the Trump administration in 2020, with 111 made before Election Day and eight more finalized by December 6, with another 15 pending review. [ProPublica also reported that the Trump administration](#) has curbed review times in a bid to push through as many new changes as possible before Biden takes office next month.

Some of those include expanding methods of federal execution to include electrocution and death by firing squad, while others span from changes to Clean Air Act enforcement to altering how Medicare reimburses physicians and allowing homeless shelters to discriminate against homeless trans people.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

China Amends National Defense Law to Clarify PLA's Defensive Nature Amid Souring US Relations

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

An updated version of China's National Defense Law was recently adopted and will enter effect on January 1, 2021, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) announced on Tuesday. The law reiterates the defensive nature of the Chinese military and elaborates on the roles of civilians in a national crisis.

[According to a news release by the PLA's](#) China Military Online, a total of 54 articles were revised, six were added and three deleted, and the titles of two chapters were changed.

The changes cover seven main aspects, including affirming Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era as the PLA's guiding thought; further defining of the defense duties of different bodies in the Chinese state; the tasks and goals for the construction of the Chinese armed forces; the importance of national interests to defense policy; the enhancement of "systems of national defense education and mobilization"; the respected position of PLA personnel in Chinese society; and the policies and systems concerning relations with foreign militaries.

"The revised law further embodies the character that China's national defense is a whole-of-people cause," China Military said.

Song Zhongping, a Chinese [military expert and commentator, wrote in the Global Times](#) on Monday that [military reforms over the last decade](#) and "profound changes" in the geopolitical situation mandate that the law be updated.

"This amendment has drawn global attention, as China's military development and strategies always arouse Western interest, particularly their media outlets," Song added. "China always insists on a defensive policy for national security. As China gains more military might, the West is worried whether Beijing will change strategies. Additionally, following the logic that 'a strong country is bound to seek hegemony,' Western countries led by the US are anxious whether China will repeat their path. This is hardly the case."

During the tenure of US President Donald Trump that is now drawing to a close, the US shifted its geostrategic posture away from the War on Terror for the first time in 19 years, preparing for [what the White House called "great power competition"](#) with Russia and China. According to Washington, China is trying to rewrite the "rules-based international order," in which the US has dominated the world since World War II, in a bid to displace the US as world leader.

Last month, [the US State Department released a white paper](#) outlining US strategy for a decades-long struggle to stop China's rise, a "cold war" in which the US will seek to isolate Beijing politically and diplomatically, undermine the Communist Party of China's rule and the socialist system, and inculcate in the US population the belief that such actions are necessary. Song also called special attention to the article outlining the PLA's fundamentally defensive nature.

"Such a statement is completely justified. It means that China will not take the initiative to invade any other country, nor will it engage in expansion. China is merely safeguarding its sovereignty and territory. It will not infringe upon an inch of territory that belongs to any other country," the analyst wrote.

"However, when it comes to development interests and safeguarding China's territorial interests, we have to do something to make our military stronger. This is not only about protecting our territorial and maritime interests, but also our interests overseas."

Last month, [China joined a slew of East Asian nations in signing](#) the world's largest free trade deal, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which encompasses 30% of global gross economic product. The deal notably excludes the United States, but includes a number of US regional allies, including Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, as well as a number of nations the US has tried to drive away from Chinese influence, such as members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

As 2020 draws to a close, China will be the only major nation to record positive economic growth for the year. [Although it clocked a modest 2% growth](#) in 2020, its performance was incredibly lopsided, with the first half of the year being dominated by sharp contractions due to shutdowns as the COVID-19 pandemic began. However, Beijing's quick and thorough response ensured that the economy had restarted by mid-year, and [by November the country was setting export records](#) compared to prior years.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Photo: Researchers Discover 12 New Deep-Sea Species in Multi-Year Study of Atlantic Waters by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Funded by the European Union, the \$11 million ATLAS project involved the participation of 13 nations and more than 80 scientists and student volunteers. The expedition was considered the largest-ever oceanic enterprise, as officials hoped to gain a better understanding of the water, seafloor, currents and creatures living within the Atlantic.

In concluding their yearslong study, researchers recently announced their project led to the discovery of 12 deep-sea species that had not been previously known to scientists, including new kinds of coral.

Officials noted in their findings that among the several new discoveries was a coral growth known as *Epizoanthus martinsae*, which researchers explained thrives on black corals located more than 1,300 feet below the ocean surface.

Two moss animals known as *Microporella funbio*, which was discovered near an undersea mud volcano along the Spanish coast, and *Antropora gemarita* were also found in the Atlantic waters. Researchers detailed that *Antropora gemarita* happens to feed on particles of food that are suspended in the water.

The team of researchers also found up to 35 species in parts of the Atlantic Ocean where they were not previously known to exist.

"We found whole communities formed by sponges or deep ocean corals that form the cities of the deep sea," Murray Roberts, who led the ATLAS project, [told the BBC](#). "They support life. So really important fish use these places as spawning grounds."

"If those cities are damaged by destructive human uses, those fish have nowhere to spawn and the function of those whole ecosystems is lost for future generations."

"It's like understanding that the rainforest is an important place for biodiversity on the land; the same is true of the deep sea - there are important places that need to be protected and, crucially, they are all connected," the University of Edinburgh professor added.

In a [statement to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#), Roberts stated that coral “skeletons are getting more porous as that slightly acidic sea water corrodes and damages their skeleton.” Cold-water corals and seastars

While mapping ocean currents, officials also uncovered a field of hydrothermal vents in the Azores, an autonomous region of Portugal. Hot springs along the ocean floor are known for supporting marine life such as yeti crabs and scaly-foot gastropods, as well as tube worms and vent mussels.

As deep-sea dives were not an option for the study, officials largely relied on the use of undersea robots that were able to retrieve various scientific specimens. The multi-year study has so far resulted in the publication of 113 peer-reviewed research papers, [according to Science Alert](#), which also reported that 98 additional studies are expected.

Researchers intend to launch a new study to undertake a deeper examination of the southern Atlantic waters, which will last until at least 2023.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Iran to Pay \$150,000 to Each Family of Victims Killed in Downed Ukrainian Flight
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 was downed on January 8, 2020, by a pair of missiles deployed by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) moments after the airliner took off from the Tehran Imam Khomeini International Airport. All 176 passengers and crew were killed. Iranian officials have blamed the downing on human error.

The Iranian government revealed on Wednesday that the families of the 176 people aboard the doomed flight will receive \$150,000 each, or its equivalent in euros, as compensation for the fatal incident.

The official [Islamic Republic News Agency reported](#) that the Iranian Cabinet indicated the money must be paid out to families “without considering their race and nationalities in compliance with international norms.” Additionally, the report stated that the funds would be pulled from the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development “in cooperation with other national sectors.”

A specific date for the release of funds was not provided.

In response to the announcement, Oleh Nikolenko, a spokesperson for Ukraine’s foreign ministry, [told Reuters](#), “This situation is especially unacceptable, since we are talking about the fate of innocent people.”

The official added that the “Ukrainian side expects from Iran a draft technical report on the circumstances of the aircraft shooting down.”

Following the Cabinet meeting, Iranian Transport and Urban Development Minister Mohammad Eslami [revealed to reporters that a final report](#) on the downed flight has been completed and will be released by Iran’s Civil Aviation Organization shortly.

A [preliminary report issued in August](#) by the Middle Eastern country’s aviation agency determined passengers and crew were still alive when the first missile struck the Boeing 737 jet,

and that the plane crash-landed once the second missile hit the aircraft 25 seconds after the initial strike.

In the aftermath of the crash, Iranian officials admitted human error prompted the incident, explaining in the report that individuals manning military arms were unable to communicate with their superiors and mistook the airliner for an enemy target. The deadly incident came hours after the IRGC launched retaliatory strikes against the US in Iraq over the killing of elite Quds Force commander Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani.

Citing the Fars News Agency, Reuters reported that an indictment into the downing would be issued against the accused in less than a month, noting that the case was being handled by a military court.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

McConnell: Democrats' \$2,000 Stimulus Check Bill Has 'No Realistic Path to Quickly Pass the Senate'
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

After the US House of Representatives passed a measure to increase the second round of stimulus checks to \$2,000, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) quickly shut down efforts in the Republican-held chamber to vote on the measure, instead introducing his own bill that tied the increase to two issues widely objected to by Democrats.

McConnell informed his fellow congressional lawmakers on the Senate floor Wednesday that the Democratic measure to increase the dollar amount of previously approved federal stimulus checks wouldn't be taken up anytime soon.

The Republican leader stressed that the measure has "[no realistic path to quickly pass the Senate](#)," as his priority in the chamber is the vote on overriding US President Donald Trump's veto of the 2021 defense bill. He added that the Senate is "not going to be bullied into rushing out more borrowed money into the hands of Democratic rich friends who don't need the help." Late Tuesday, hours after McConnell rejected a vote on the [House-passed bill to enlarge the federal checks by \\$1,400](#), the Kentucky official [put forward a measure](#) that offered the financial boost; however, he linked the funding to a repeal of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act and the commission of a study that would examine allegations of voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election.

In sum, the inclusion of the repeal and the study effectively kills any chances of struggling Americans being given \$2,000 to help with pandemic-related setbacks.

McConnell vowed that the Senate chamber "is not going split apart the three issues that President Trump linked together just because Democrats are afraid to address two of them." Earlier in the day, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) [told reporters that Senate Republicans](#) "are in denial of the hardship the American people are experiencing now, health wise, financially and every way" by blocking the funding legislation.

Although the US Congress had initially cleared \$600 stimulus checks to go out to Americans, a push to increase the dollar amount to \$2,000 gained new traction after Trump decried the

approved amount as “ridiculously low.” The commander-in-chief also indicated that the COVID-19 relief was a “disgrace” [in a video address last week](#).

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Trump Administration May Place Cuba on US' Terrorism Sponsor List - Report
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Under the Trump administration, relations between the US and Cuba have grown increasingly tense, with the Land of the Free informing congressional lawmakers in May that the island nation was “not cooperating fully” with the US’ counterterrorism efforts.

Officials within the US Department of State have reportedly drafted a proposal to designate Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, a move widely seen as a last-minute bid by the Trump administration to block any intention by the incoming administration to ease relations.

Citing two officials familiar with the development, [the New York Times reported on Tuesday](#) that the potential designation would serve as a “thank-you” to Cuban Americans and other Trump supporters who live in Florida and strongly oppose the Cuban government.

Officials also noted the proposal was developed by the State Department’s Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, not the Counterterrorism Bureau which would typically play a key role in such a decision.

Ben Rhodes, the former deputy national security adviser who helped reestablish diplomatic relations with Cuba under the Obama administration, told the outlet reports of the possible move are “complete nonsense.”

“Cuba is not a state sponsor of terrorism,” he said, noting the proposal being developed by the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs was evidence the motion is politically motivated. “This is a sign that they know they can’t get Cuba on the list on the merits.”

In order to add a country to the list, the [agency must prove](#) that the nation has “repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism.” Once added, the designation allows Washington to issue restrictions on US foreign assistance, ban defense exports and sales, exert control over exports on dual-use items, and implement other miscellaneous financial restrictions. Cuba was first added to the terrorism list in 1982 under the Reagan administration for supporting leftist groups throughout Latin America; however, the island nation was later removed in 2015 as both nations began to normalize relations for the very first time since Cuba’s 1959 revolution.

Earlier this year, the Trump administration began to give hints of its intentions to relist Cuba as a terrorism sponsor when the State Department formally notified the US Congress in May that the country was failing to cooperate with the US’ counterterrorism measures. The agency specifically cited Cuba’s refusal to extradite 10 members of Colombia’s National Liberation Army residing in Havana who had claimed responsibility for the January 2019 bombing of a police academy in Bogotá.

More recently, a State Department-sponsored study [prompted an even more heated standoff](#) between the two countries after it claimed that directed radio frequency energy was the “most

plausible mechanism” responsible for the mysterious symptoms that several diplomats at the US and Canadian Embassies in Havana reported experiencing in late 2016. Cuban officials rejected the early December report and stated that the conclusion was “certainly not a proven fact.” Additionally, the US [recently issued sanctions](#) against three businesses it accused of being run by the Cuban military and sidestepping existing sanctions. At present, the US only has North Korea, Iran and Syria on its list of state sponsors of terrorism. Sudan was previously included but was removed after the North African country agreed to normalize relations with Israel.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

‘Brother’ From Another Mother - Political Cartoon

Making the most of his remaining time in the Oval Office, US President Donald Trump has focused much of his time on drawing more attention to the upcoming Georgia run-off elections, which will determine whether the US Senate will remain under Republican control or flip over to the Democrats.

Late Tuesday, the commander-in-chief took to Twitter once again to highlight the state elections, lashing out at both Republican Gov. Brian Kemp and Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a fellow Republican and proud Trump supporter, by calling the pair a “[complete disaster](#).”

Trump had more ire to share, critiquing Raffensperger by saying his brother “[works for China](#)” and adding that “they definitely don’t want ‘Trump.’” But here’s the kicker - while Raffensperger does indeed have a brother, he does not “work for China.”

Furthermore, while there is a man who bears the same surname and serves as the chief technical officer for a subsidiary of the Huawei conglomerate, he has no apparent relation to Georgia’s secretary of state, [according to the Daily Beast](#).

T-minus 21 days until Inauguration Day, folks.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Pence Reportedly Nixes Final Trip to Middle East
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Sources close to US Vice President Mike Pence previously said he would travel overseas to the countries of Bahrain, Israel and Poland shortly after the conclusion of the January 6 joint session of Congress, which will presumably see the body formally confirm US President-elect Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election.

A spokesperson for the US Embassy [confirmed to The Times of Israel](#) on Wednesday that Pence’s planned visit to Israel had been canceled. Officials did not disclose a reason for the

cancellation of the trip, which was slated to be the outgoing vice president's final visit to Israel before leaving office.

Earlier this month, [a government document viewed by Politico](#) reportedly showed that Pence would be taking his first overseas trip amid the COVID-19 pandemic to Bahrain, Israel and Poland following the January 6 congressional joint session, where bipartisan representatives from both legislative chambers will perform an official, out-loud count of the Electoral College votes from the presidential election.

[Additional stops in Belgium](#) and other countries were also said to be open to consideration, but all stops have been nixed from the vice president's schedule, [Bloomberg reported, citing sources familiar with the matter](#).

Israeli Regional Cooperation Minister and Likud Party member Ofir Akunis also loosely spoke of the vice president's visit, signaling that local authorities had begun preparations.

"Pence is planning on visiting Israel. I don't want to commit to the dates. It's likely that during the trip itself there will be a declaration of normalization" with another Muslim country, he said earlier this month, as reported by the Times of Israel.

Pence's last trip out of the country was back in January of this year, when he visited Rome, Italy; and Jerusalem, Israel.

Speculation quickly followed the report about Pence's future travels, with many arguing that the vice president's trip was organized to avoid any possible in-person fallout from those angered by the January 6 congressional joint session.

While Biden secured 306 Electoral College votes, well above the 270 margin needed to secure a victory over US President Donald Trump, many Republican lawmakers have expressed that they will oppose the Electoral College vote over allegations of widespread voter fraud.

More recently, Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) joined the likes of Rep. Mo Brooks (R-AL) in publicly vowing to contest the election results.

"I cannot vote to certify the Electoral College results on January 6 without raising the fact that some states, particularly Pennsylvania, failed to follow their own state election laws. And I cannot vote to certify without pointing out the unprecedented effort of mega corporations, including Facebook and Twitter, to interfere in this election, in support of Joe Biden," [Hawley said in a Wednesday news release](#).

"At the very least, Congress should investigate allegations of voter fraud and adopt measures to secure the integrity of our elections. But Congress has so far failed to act."

Sen.-elect Tommy Tuberville (R-AL) [has also floated](#) the idea that he may oppose certifying the Electoral College vote on January 6.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Los Angeles Residents Rally to Block Christian Singer's 'Superspreader' Event
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The state of California exceeded 250,000 COVID-19-related deaths and more than 2,240,000 confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus on Wednesday, according to the LA Times. The state also became the second, behind Colorado, to identify the presence of a new COVID-19 strain. Church Without Walls pastor Stephen "Cue" Jn-Marie and other LA-based residents are insisting that Christian evangelical singer Sean Feucht cancel his planned New Year's Eve "Let Us Worship" event, said to be geared toward the homeless community in Los Angeles. According to the Church Without Walls pastor, Feucht has a poor track record when it comes to COVID-19 precautions at his event - such as social distancing and wearing face masks. "We know based on his track record whatever he's going to do is going to be maskless," Jn-Marie [told the LA Times](#). "The problem we're facing is even prior to the stay-at-home order, people come into the community and say they're bringing resources but what they're bringing is the disease."

The event comes as one of several concerts to be put on by Feucht as pushback against state government COVID-19-related restrictions on large gatherings.

Jn-Marie and Pete White, executive director of the L.A. Community Action Network, have organized a Facebook event entitled "Resistance Blockade Against Biological Warfare!" The event seeks to form a "social distance car caravan" to stop Feucht's "incursion into their neighborhood."

"It's a super spreader event," Jenna Kyle of the Poor People's Campaign [told CBS LA](#), speaking of Feucht's upcoming event. "They're coming in with no masks, no social distance. They haven't done either in their past events. Chicago tried to shut them down. New Orleans put out a statement that they regretted that they ever allowed the event to occur."

The community push to stop a possible superspreader event comes as hospitals in southern California are overflowing.

"We certainly know that Southern California hospitals are in crisis, and some have begun to implement parts of crisis care," said Dr. Mark Ghaly, secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency, [as reported by NBC News](#).

[According to data from the California Department of Health](#), 30,921 new cases of the novel coronavirus were logged on Tuesday, as well as 432 new COVID-19-related deaths within the state.

The state reached the grim milestone of [25,000 deaths related to the pandemic](#) on Wednesday. Some netizens defended Feucht for what they characterize as "the works of Jesus."

"There's nothing and no one that can stop the mighty moving force of Jesus Christ! No man -no sickness -no disease," tweeted @PastoraRhonda, [a pastor at RHEMA Mexico](#).

"We will preach. We will pray and WE WILL WORSHIP!! Jesus is Lord over all the earth!!!!"

Despite the pushback, Feucht tweeted a video on Wednesday announcing that only one more day remained before the event.

"THE GREATER THE RESISTANCE, THE GREATER THE BREAKTHROUGH!" Feucht tweeted hours later.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Trump Declassifying Unverified Intelligence China Placed Bounties on US Troops - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration is planning to declassify unverified intelligence indicating that China has placed bounties on US troops in Afghanistan, the news website Axios reported citing two senior administration officials.

The report said on Wednesday that China offered to pay non-state actors in Afghanistan to attack US troops.

The Trump administration is currently working to confirm the intelligence, the report said.

President Donald Trump was personally briefed on the matter by National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien and it was included in his briefing on December 17, the report said.

The report noted that Trump is believed to have not discussed the issue with Chinese President Xi Jinping, adding that the Chinese embassy in the United States did not respond to a request for comment.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Awards \$903M In Modification Contract to Lockheed for F-35 Parts, Materials - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has awarded a \$903 million modification contract to Lockheed Martin to acquire the materials, components and support needed to produce 133 F-35 fighter jets, the Defense Department said in a press release. "Lockheed Martin Corp., Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Co., Fort Worth, Texas, is awarded a \$903,585,384 modification (P00007) to a previously awarded, fixed-price incentive," the release said on Wednesday.

The release said the modification contract will ensure the necessary parts are procured to maintain on-time production and delivery of 133 fighter jets for the US Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, non-US Defense Department participants and foreign military sales.

Work is expected to be completed by May 2026, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Lawmaker Seeks Police Body Cam Video of Indian Suspect Tasered at National Park

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Raul Grijalva is seeking the police body cam footage of a Marine veteran and registered member of two American Indian nations being tasered by police while visiting a site featuring Native American relics, according to a press release.

"In a new letter to Interior Secretary David Bernhardt ... Chair Raul M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.) requests footage from body-worn cameras used by National Park Service (NPS) officers involved in the Dec. 27 tasered of Darrell House, a Marine Corps veteran and enrolled member

of the Navajo Nation and Oneida Nation, at Petroglyph National Monument," the release said on Wednesday.

House, a member of the Oneida and Navajo nations, claims he went for a stroll with his sister and his dog Sunday afternoon at the Petroglyph National Monument, which features images carved into rocks by Native Americans hundreds of years ago, the release added.

The National Park Service released some footage from the officer's body camera, but it is not clear whether the material satisfied Grijalva request.

The video, now widely viewed on social media, appears to show an officer asking House for identification multiple times, House refusing and then giving a false name and birth date. The incident escalates with House on the ground wreathing from one or more taser shots.

House was not arrested but given multiple citations, media reports said.

Grijalva and his committee are investigating multiple incidents in which National Park Police are accused of using excessive force, including the fatal shootings of two unarmed suspects, one in the state of New Mexico and another near Washington, DC, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

California Confirms First Case of New Coronavirus Strain - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - Health officials in the US state of California have confirmed a first case of the new mutated coronavirus strain that was first detected in the United Kingdom, Governor Gavin Newsom said.

"Just an hour or so ago we were informed that this new variant, this new strain has been identified here in the state of California, in southern California," Newsom said in a virtual discussion with top US health official Dr. Anthony Fauci on Wednesday.

Fauci said Californians should not feel odd about the discovery of the new strain and added that more cases are expected to be identified in other US states. Fauci also said US health officials still believe coronavirus vaccines will work against the new strain.

Health officials in the state of Colorado have confirmed one case of the new strain and suspect they have a second patient who likely is infected with the new strain as well.

Earlier in December, the UK authorities announced that a new coronavirus strain was detected in the country, adding that the new variant can be up to 70 percent more transmissible. There is no evidence that the new strain is more pathogenic.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Nominates Kathleen Hicks, Colin Kahl for Senior Pentagon Positions - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden has nominated former senior officials Kathleen Hicks and Colin Kahl for top positions at the Department of Defense, the Biden-Harris transition team said in a statement.

"Today, President-elect Joe Biden announced his nomination of Dr. Kathleen Hicks as the Deputy Secretary of Defense and Dr. Colin Kahl as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy," the statement said on Wednesday.

Biden said the nominees have the broad experience necessary to help tackle the threats the United States faces.

"They will be trusted partners to me, the vice president-elect, and Secretary-designate [Lloyd] Austin," Biden said.

Hicks currently leads Biden's Defense Department transition team and works as a strategist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Kohl held several positions in the Obama administration, including National Security Advisor to Biden.

If confirmed, Hicks would become the first woman to hold the No. 2 position at the Defense Department.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Canada to Require Air Travelers to Test Negative For COVID-19 - Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - Canada will soon require air travelers to test negative for COVID-19 before coming into the country, Canadian Foreign Minister François-Philippe Champagne announced via Twitter on Wednesday.

"As an additional measure to protect the health and safety of Canadians, the Government of Canada will soon require air travelers to test negative for COVID-19 before boarding international flights bound for Canada," Philippe Champagne said via Twitter.

Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Dominic LeBlanc said officials would start implementing the measure within the coming days.

Dozen of countries have turned more vigilant in recent weeks in demanding that air travelers headed their way be screened for the coronavirus even before they get on the plane, following the discovery of a new variant of the virus in Britain, which UK authorities said was 70 percent more transmissible than the COVID-19 as it is known. At least 40 countries have reportedly closed their borders to UK-originating flights until more is known about the new virus variant. Canadian officials earlier this week said they had detected the new strain in Ontario, the country's most populous province.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Firm Pays \$98,830 Fine for Busting Sanctions Against 4 Nations Plus Crimea - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - BitGo, a US company that specializes in managing customers' digital assets, agreed to pay \$98,830 in a settlement of US sanctions violations involving Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria as well as Crimea, the Treasury Department said in a press release.

"The apparent violations were processed between March 10, 2015 and December 11, 2019 on behalf of persons located in the Crimea region of Ukraine, Cuba, Iran, Sudan, or Syria that were using BitGo's non-custodial secure digital wallet management service," the release said on Wednesday.

The Treasury Department explained that the \$98,830 fine settles potential civil liability for 183 apparent violations of multiple US sanctions programs.

The United States has targeted Crimea with sanctions after a 2014 referendum in which voters overwhelmingly approved a measure to rejoin Russia. Moscow has said the referendum was organized according to international law and practice.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Nashville Bomber's Girlfriend Told Police He Was 'Building Bombs' in His RV - Documents

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The girlfriend of the man who set off an explosion in downtown Nashville had told police more than a year ago that he was building bombs in his recreational vehicle, documents published by the city's police department showed.

"On August 21 2019 police responded to a call for service," said a report filed at the time of the incident and published by the Nashville Police Department on Wednesday. "During the incident Op 1 (Pamela Perry) made statements that her boyfriend (Anthony Warner) was building bombs in the RV trailer at his residence."

Investigators on Monday confirmed that the 63-year-old suspect's remains were found at the scene of the blast.

In a statement accompanying the report, the police department defended its response to the incident involving the girlfriend, saying they had asked the FBI to check its databases and determine whether Warner had any military connections or posed any known threat.

The FBI reported back that they found no records on Warner at all, the police statement said.

"At no time was there any evidence of a crime detected and no additional action was taken," the statement added.

In total, three people suffered injuries as a result of the blast, which investigators have said was "intentional."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) -

EU-UK AGREEMENT

- * The UK House of Commons on Wednesday voted in favor of implementing the country's future partnership agreement with the European Union.
- * UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has signed off on the post-Brexit future partnership agreement that was reached with the European Union on Christmas Eve.

ATTACK ON AIRPORT IN YEMEN

- * The death toll from the shelling of Aden airport in southern Yemen has increased to 22 and more than 50 people were injured, a local source in Aden told Sputnik on Wednesday.
- * Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalek Saeed pledged attacks against the new government would not affect his determination to continue work and counter terrorism.
- * Russia strongly condemns the attacks at the Aden airport, where the new Yemeni cabinet members were arriving, and advocates for a thorough and objective investigation, the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

RUSSIA STOPS RESCUE OPERATION IN BARENTS SEA

- * Russian Federal Agency for Maritime and River Transport (Rosmorrechflot) said the search and rescue operation in the area of the Onega trawler wreck has been stopped and the Il-38 search airplane did not find anything.

US PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

- * US President Donald Trump could take steps in the coming weeks to scuttle the domestic and national security agenda of President-elect Joe Biden, transition team spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.
- * Biden will announce his remaining cabinet picks in early January, Psaki said.

NEW COVID-19 TREATMENTS

- * Russia's Federal Medical-Biological Agency (FMBA) said it had received permission from the Health Ministry to conduct clinical trials of a drug against the novel coronavirus and is recruiting volunteers.
- * Russia's Gamaleya Center is testing an antibodies-based drug for treatment of the coronavirus on experimental animals, the head of the center, Alexander Gintsburg, told Sputnik.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Hacker Extradited From Dominican Republic Gets 30-Months in Jail - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) – A hacker who used stolen identities to commit tax fraud received a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence following her extradition to the United

States from the Dominican Republic, the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

"From 2010 through May 2014, [Arleny] Reyes Nunez prepared and filed approximately 29 false tax returns, retrieved the refund checks (sometimes paying a minor child to retrieve paper checks from mailboxes at vacant Philadelphia properties), and deposited the checks into bank accounts associated with fake businesses she created in furtherance of this scheme," the release said. "Later, in order to avoid apprehension, the defendant fled to her home country of the Dominican Republic."

Reyes Nunez was arrested for using a false passport and extradited back to the United States in January 2020, the release said.

US District Court Judge Harvey Bartle sentenced Reyes Nunez to 30 months in prison, followed by 3 years of probation and ordered the defendant to pay \$154,528 in restitution for a scheme that resulted in more than \$150,000 in losses to the federal government, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

California Plans \$2Bln Effort to Reopen Schools Due to Evidence of Decreased Risks- Newsom

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - A \$2 billion plan to open schools, first to younger children with ages gradually increasing throughout spring comes in response to new evidence of decreased risk of contracting the novel coronavirus during classroom instruction, Governor Gavin Newsom said in a press release on Wednesday.

"The Budget will propose for immediate action in January, \$2 billion to support safety measures - including testing, ventilation and PPE - for schools that have resumed in-person instruction or phasing in of in-person instruction by early spring," Newsom said.

Newsom cited unspecified yet "growing evidence of decreased risks and increased benefits" of in-person instruction during the coronavirus pandemic.

The plan begins by bringing back children in traditional kindergarten through second grade and then phasing in other grade levels throughout the spring, the release said.

The effort will require prioritization of teachers and other school staff for vaccinations, while continuing mitigation measures such as frequent testing and facemasks for all students and staff, the release added.

Parents will also have the option of keeping their children at home for virtual instruction with computers, according to the release.

US educators have grown increasingly alarmed over students falling behind and growing failure rates in school systems that closed classrooms and switched to remote learning when the pandemic emerged in early 2020.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden to Announce Remaining Cabinet Picks in 2021 - Transition Team

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden will announce his remaining cabinet picks in early January, transition team advisor Jen Psaki said in a virtual press conference on Wednesday.

"We won't have new cabinet announcements to make until the new year," Psaki told reporters. Biden has yet to announce his picks for US Attorney General and Labor Secretary.

Biden was confirmed the winner of the November presidential election by the Electoral College on December 14 after all 50 states officially certified the voting results. President Donald Trump has refused to concede defeat and continues to dispute the result saying he won but victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud.

State and federal courts have rejected some 60 legal challenges filed by the Trump campaign and the Republican party.

Biden's inauguration is scheduled for January 20.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Trump Could Take 'Destructive' Steps to Block Biden's Policy Goals - Transition

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) – US President Donald Trump could take some steps in the coming weeks to scuttle the domestic and national security agenda of incoming President-elect Joe Biden, spokesperson for his transition team Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

"There are additional actions that the Trump administration and members of the team can take in the weeks ahead that are damaging and destructive to our policies, whether they're national security policies or domestic policies," Psaki said during virtual press briefing.

Psaki said the incoming Biden administration was already preparing to take bold action across the federal government to roll back any harmful measures as quickly as possible, beginning on Inauguration Day.

"We are announcing today that, like other incoming administrations have done before, the Biden-Harris White House will issue a memo to take effect afternoon Eastern Time on January 20 that will halt or delay midnight regulations, actions taken by the Trump administration that will not have taken effect by Inauguration Day," Psaki said.

Biden will start his Presidential duties after inauguration on January 20, 2021.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Embassy in Burkina Faso Warns of Terrorist Threat Over New Year's Holiday

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - Americans in Burkina Faso are being warned to avoid hotels and restaurants frequented by foreigners due to the threat of terrorist attacks over the New Year's holiday, the US Embassy said in a travel alert on Wednesday.

"The US Embassy reminds US citizens that terrorist groups continue plotting attacks in Burkina Faso and may be planning attacks over the 2021 New Year's holiday," the alert said. "As a result, the Embassy has informed its employees to avoid hotels and restaurants frequented by expatriates and Westerners over the New Year's holiday, as these locations have historically been the target of terrorist attacks."

The alert warned that terrorists could conduct attacks with little warning against sites frequented by Westerners and other expatriates in the capital of Ouagadougou.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (banned in Russia) claimed responsibility for a recent series of attacks, including multiple strikes over a two-month period in late 2018 that prompted Burkina Faso to impose a state of emergency, according to media reports.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Nine in 10 Americans Want Voting Reform Before Next Election – Poll

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) – A 90 percent majority of US adults want reforms in voter registration, voting systems and ballot counting prior to the 2024 presidential election, according to a poll by Scott Rasmussen on Wednesday.

"While there are varying degrees of intensity, majorities of every measured demographic group say it is Very Important to improve the way that elections are conducted. That view is shared by 81% of Republicans, 58% of Independents, and 57% of Democrats," a press release explaining the poll said.

President Donald Trump, who continues to claim he lost the November election due to massive electoral fraud, managed to secure recounts in several Republican-leaning states where he lost to President-elect Joe Biden.

In chaotic days following the November 3 election, recounts failed to overturn results in any US state, as accounts of irregularities collected by Trump supporters fell far short of the volume needed to challenge Biden's victory margins.

US courts meanwhile have rejected dozens of lawsuits from the Trump campaign challenging election results.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Colorado Detects Second Possible Case of Mutated Coronavirus - Health Official

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The authorities in the US state of Colorado have detected a second possible case of an individual infected with the mutated coronavirus, the state's epidemiologist Rachel Herlihy said during a virtual press conference on Wednesday. "Our investigation efforts and contact tracing are ongoing but at this time we are aware of one confirmed and another possible case with the B.1.1.7 variant of the virus," Herlihy said. Herlihy noted that both patients are National Guardsmen who were sent to the Good Samaritan Society nursing home in Simla, Colorado, on December 23 to provide support to the facility. The National Guardsmen had not traveled internationally prior to arriving at the nursing home and there is no evidence that the mutated virus is circulating in the nursing home, Herlihy said. Colorado Governor Jared Polis said the patient confirmed to have contracted the mutated coronavirus has mild symptoms.

On Tuesday, Polis confirmed Colorado health officials detected the first known case of the mutated variant in the United States, and described the patient as a man in his 20s. Earlier in December, the UK authorities announced that a new coronavirus strain was detected in the country, adding that the new variant can be up to 70 percent more transmissible. There is no evidence that the new strain is more pathogenic.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Initial Round of Coronavirus Vaccinations for US Forces in Europe in Progress - EUCOM

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The initial round of coronavirus vaccinations for prioritized US military personnel in Europe is currently underway, the European Command announced in a release on Wednesday.

"The initial round of COVID-19 vaccinations is underway for prioritized Department of Defense (DOD) personnel serving within the US European Command (EUCOM) area of responsibility," the release said. "The DOD vaccination program began in Europe on Dec. 28 when the Moderna vaccine was administered to healthcare workers serving at three US Army medical treatment facilities located in Bavaria."

The European Command noted that three Defense Department medical facilities in the United Kingdom also began vaccinating patients and additional medical facilities there and in Germany are scheduled to start inoculating personnel this week.

In addition, Defense Department clinics in Italy, Spain, Belgium and Portugal are slated to receive their first shipment of the vaccine, the release said.

The initial vaccination phase will last about a month because of the 28-day time period between the first and second dose of the Moderna vaccine.

The United States has authorized two vaccines - from the bio-tech companies Pfizer and Moderna - to conduct an ongoing immunization against the novel coronavirus. Each is administered in two shots with an interval of several weeks required between them.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Forms Committee to Tackle Vast Wealth Disparity - Speaker Pelosi

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The new US House after taking the oath of office in January will form a new committee to tackle the crisis of income and wealth disparity that is accelerating as a result of the coronavirus crisis, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Wednesday. "I am proud to announce the creation of the new, bipartisan Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in Growth, which will be an essential force in Congressional Democrats' action to combat the crisis of income and wealth disparity in America," Pelosi said.

The speaker said the panel would modeled upon the so-called National Economic Committee founded by President Roosevelt and Congress during the Great Depression of the 1930s to study and combat the concentration of wealth in America and its role in triggering economic collapse.

"Clearly, the disparities in income and equity in our country are vast. We've known that they've only gotten worse and the pandemic again puts it in sharper focus," she added.

The United States has been the country hardest hit by the COVID-19 since its global outbreak this year, with more than 19.5 million positive cases logged since January and over 338,000 deaths related to the virus. After a respite in the summer to early fall period, infections have started surging again, pushing hospitalization up to daily record highs of above 100,000 in recent weeks.

Some 10 months into the coronavirus pandemic, a third of US adults are having difficulty covering everyday costs such as food, rent or car payments, according to a recent survey by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

The next US Congress will be sworn in on January 3.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Pelosi Offers Condolences to Family of Late US Congressman-Elect Letlow

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi extended her condolences to the family of the late Congressman-elect Luke Letlow, who passed away on Tuesday from complications after contracting the novel coronavirus.

"Sadly, the Congress received the News last evening of the passing of a new member of Congress Luke Letlow of Louisiana due to be sworn in this Sunday but taken by the coronavirus yesterday," Pelosi said on Wednesday. "He leaves his wife and two babies and we extend deep sympathy to his family.

Pelosi noted that Letlow, 41, died after contracting the novel coronavirus and a resulting blood clot.

The US House speaker warned that anyone can suffer such fate as have nearly 350,000 Americans so far.

Letlow was scheduled to be sworn in as representative in Congress on January 3.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Senator to Join House Republicans in Objecting to Electoral College Results - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - US Senator Josh Hawley on Wednesday said he would object to the results of the Electoral College when Congress convenes on January 6 to validate President-elect Joe Biden's victory, joining dozens of House Republicans in a plan to challenge the results.

"Millions of voters concerned about election integrity deserve to be heard," Hawley said via Twitter. "I will object on January on their behalf."

Hawley's plan to object during the certification process on January 6 clears the path for Republicans to force debate and vote on states' Electoral College results.

A member of both the House of Representatives and the Senate must file an objection in writing to force a debate and vote to challenge any state's Electoral College results. However, a majority of lawmakers in both the House and Senate would have to vote to uphold the objection. In a separate statement, Hawley alleged that some states failed to follow their own election laws and accused social media giants like Twitter of interfering in this year's presidential election in support of Biden.

Moreover, Hawley said Congress should at least investigate allegations of voter fraud and adopt measures to strengthen the security of the US elections.

Biden was confirmed the winner of the November presidential election by the Electoral College on December 14 after all 50 states officially certified the voting results. Trump, however, has refused to concede, alleging voter fraud, despite his campaign losing nearly all of some 60 legal challenges filed within the past month. Biden's inauguration is scheduled for January 20.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Sanctions Venezuelan Judge, Prosecutor Over Trial of CITGO Executives - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on a Venezuelan judge and a prosecutor over their roles in the sentencing of six former US executives of the CITGO oil company, the Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Venezuelan judge Lorena Carolina Cornielles Ruiz and Venezuelan prosecutor Ramon Antonio Torres Espinoza, the Venezuelan government officials who presided over and

prosecuted the November 2020 trial and sentencing of six US persons in Venezuela," the statement said.

In November, the Venezuelan Supreme Court sentenced to prison terms six former US executives of CITGO, a subsidiary of Venezuela's state oil giant PDVSA, on charges of corruption.

The Treasury Department said the trials of each of the executives were based on politically motivated charges and marred by a lack of fair trial guarantees.

"Media and human rights groups denounced the treatment of the executives and were denied access to the trials," the statement said.

The Treasury Department pointed out in the release that Ruiz is a judge in the Executive Directorate of the Venezuelan Supreme Court and presided over the trial of the Citgo 6.

"Cornielles ultimately sentenced each of the six US persons on charges of corruption with prison sentences between eight and 13 years," the release said.

The Treasury continued also said that Espinoza is a corruption prosecutor at Venezuela's Public Ministry and was the primary prosecutor representing the government during the trial of the six executives.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a separate statement has called for the release of the six men. The State Department has said the six executives have been held without trial and denied contact with the department as well as with humanitarian organizations and religious groups.

According to the local media, Jose Pereira, the former president of CITGO, was sentenced to 13 years in prison for embezzlement, cooperation with contractors and criminal association.

Another five former executives were sentenced to jail terms ranging from eight to ten years.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden to Choose Hicks, Kahl for Senior Pentagon Positions – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) – US President-elect Joseph Biden plans to select two former senior officials for top positions at the Pentagon, the Washington Post reported on Wednesday, citing transition officials.

Biden has selected Kathleen Hicks, who currently leads his Pentagon transition team and works as a strategist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), as his nominee to be deputy defense secretary, the report said.

He also intends to pick a former Pentagon official for the Middle East, Colin Kohl, his former national security advisor, to be undersecretary of defense for policy, it added.

The decisions on both positions have not yet been formally announced.

If confirmed, Hicks would become the first woman to hold the Pentagon's second highest-ranking job.

Biden earlier announced his decision to nominate retired General Lloyd Austin for the position of defense secretary.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Begins Withdrawal of Peacekeepers From Darfur Region of Sudan

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The six-month withdrawal of UN and African Union (AU) peacekeepers from Sudan's Darfur region begins on Thursday, reflecting progress by the nation's transitional government to end nearly two decades of conflict, the UN-African Union Mission in Darfur [UNAMID] said on Wednesday

"This process should result in the withdrawal of all uniformed and civilian personnel from Sudan by 30 June 2021, except for a liquidation team that will finalize any residual issues and complete the administrative closure of UNAMID," the release said.

The UN Security Council unanimously voted last week to end UNAMID's mandate, which was first approved in 2007 to halt a campaign by government backed militias to crush an ethnic-based revolt by local tribes in Darfur that began four years earlier.

The 2019 overthrow of President Omar al Bashir, who ruled Sudan for 30 years, led to the forming of a transitional government, which negotiated a peace agreement earlier this year with two main opposition groups in Darfur - the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) alliance and the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM).

As of 1 January 2021, UNAMID's troops and police personnel will focus on providing security for the mission's drawdown activities, personnel and assets. UNAMID will have a period of six months to undertake the drawdown, which will be conducted in a phased manner, the release said.

The original mandate allowed deployments of nearly 20,000 military personnel by the hybrid UN-African Union peacekeeping mission.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Flies Strategic Bombers to Middle East to Deter Attacks - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - Two US B-52 strategic bombers made a show of force in the Middle East to deter potential attacks on American or allied targets in the region, the US Central Command said in a statement on Wednesday.

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 the assassination of Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani in an American drone strike outside Baghdad last January 3.

"US Air Force B-52H 'Stratofortress' aircrews from the Minot Air Force Base, ND-headquartered 5th Bomb Wing made a deliberate appearance in the Middle East today to underscore the US military's commitment to regional security and demonstrate a unique ability to rapidly deploy overwhelming combat power on short notice," CENTCOM said.

Without mentioning Iran specifically, the statement added that the mission delivers “a clear deterrent message” to anyone who intends to do harm to Americans or American interests. According to CENTCOM, it was the third bomber deployment in the command’s area of operation in the last 45 days.

“We do not seek conflict, but no one should underestimate our ability to defend our forces or to act decisively in response to any attack,” CENTCOM commander Gen. Frank McKenzie said in the statement.

A week ago, US President Donald Trump issued a public warning to Iran by tweeting that he will hold it responsible “if one American is killed.”

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Registers New Daily Record of 3,725 COVID-19 Deaths - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, December 30 (Sputnik) - The United States this week reported more than 3,700 coronavirus-related deaths in a single day, representing a new daily record since the beginning of the pandemic, data compiled by Johns Hopkins University revealed on Wednesday.

The data showed that on Tuesday, the country reported 201,555 new confirmed COVID-19 cases and 3,725 deaths, the highest number of fatalities in a single day since the start of the pandemic.

The previous daily record has been registered on December 17, when US reported 3,656 fatalities,

As of Wednesday morning, the US authorities have reported more than 19.5 million COVID-19 cases and more than 338,000 virus-related deaths since the start of the pandemic, the Johns Hopkins University data showed.