

Thursday 12/31/20

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'Best is Yet to Come': Trump Delivers End of 2020 Speech Praising COVID-19 Vaccine Effort by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US President Donald Trump recently outflanked Democrats by demanding higher direct payments for families than months of compromise on a recent COVID-19 relief bill had yielded. However, the bill has now stalled in the Senate as his own Republican Party leadership has blocked a vote on the proposal.

As 2020 draws to a close, Trump heaped praise upon his administration's push to develop a COVID-19 vaccine and on the state of the US economy less than a month before he is due to leave office.

Trump [returned to Washington, DC. on Thursday](#) amid a political [showdown with Congress over the provisions](#) of the Pentagon's annual funding bill and a new COVID-19 relief bill, Reuters reported. Accordingly, he delivered his final national address of the year from the White House, in which he attacked critics of his administration's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vaccine Rollout

"In the face of great challenges this year, Americans showed incredible grit, strength, tenacity and resolve, and together we achieved truly historic victories like nobody ever thought possible," Trump said in a video posted to the White House Twitter account.

He noted the onset of the pandemic in March led to the largest mobilization since World War II as factories were repurposed to build medical equipment, including ventilators and face masks, and therapies and treatments to ease the symptoms of the potentially deadly respiratory illness were rapidly developed. This, he said, "saved millions of American lives."

"Over and over again we were told it would be impossible to deliver a vaccine by the end of the year," Trump said. "All of the experts said 'absolutely unthinkable, Trump is exaggerating, it can't happen.' And we did it, long before the end of the year. They said it would take a medical miracle, and that's exactly what it is. Years from now they'll be talking about it; they'll be talking about this great, great thing that we did with the vaccines."

He promised that by early 2021, every American will have access to a vaccine, after which the US will ship vaccines to other countries to "end the pandemic once and for all."

The president's attention then shifted to the economy, which has remained a cornerstone of his claims of success throughout his four-year administration.

Economic Recovery

"Before the pandemic, we built the greatest economy in the history of the world; now we are doing it again. We've actually built, if you think about it, two great economies: before and after," Trump said.

He noted the government passed \$3 trillion in economic relief after the pandemic began, including aid to families, businesses and Wall Street, and said the Paycheck Protection Program alone had "saved or supported more than 51 million American jobs."

"We're doing numbers now like nobody's ever seen before, including having the highest stock market in the history of the world. I froze student loan payments, stopped evictions, suspended payroll taxes; we have slashed the unemployment rate from 14.7% all the way down to 6.7%, and a lot of people thought that the 14.7% could be 32% or 40% or 45%, and now we're down to 6.7% and heading a lot lower," Trump said.

He also noted the country saw a 33.4% increase in gross domestic product in the third quarter of 2020, claiming it had recovered much faster than European nations from the near-total shutdowns of early 2020 and that "nobody can compete with us in terms of going down less and going up by far the fastest and the best."

Trump also briefly mentioned meeting some other goals of his administration, including the return of manufacturing jobs to the US; major controls placed on immigration to the US, including beginning construction of a wall along the US-Mexico border; lowering drug prices; and "signing historic peace deals in the Middle East."

"It's all ending in the Middle East," Trump said. "We have to hope it keeps going. It's so easy, if you know what you're doing."

"In this season of joy, Americans have so much to be grateful for. We're all blessed to live in the greatest country ever to exist on the face of the Earth, and we have made it greater than ever before. As long as we remain loyal to our nation, devoted to our citizens and faithful to Almighty God, we know that the best is yet to come. God bless you, and God bless America," he said.

State of the Nation

Trump's speech comes as the pandemic enters its worst phase so far in the United States. [According to data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and aggregates collected by the New York Times](#), at least 344,200 Americans have died of the novel coronavirus, with more than 3,700 dying just on Wednesday - the deadliest day of the pandemic to date. More than 230,000 new cases were recorded in the US on Wednesday, and the seven-day average for daily new cases sits at 180,671 per day - down from the average of 230,000 per day earlier this month.

While US stock indices set records at the end of the year and GDP growth has begun to rise, economic predictions for 2020 as a whole are especially dire. [According to the US Department of Commerce](#), US GDP is expected to contract by 3.5% for all of 2020. [The most recent US Department of Labor data](#), from early December, prior to the onset of many new lockdowns, showed 10.7 million Americans in the labor force were out of work, with another 7.1 million people who are not in the labor force but want a job.

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Watch Tracer Rounds Dance Across Beirut Sky Amid Fireworks as Revelers Fire Off Guns for New Year

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Lebanese authorities have issued widespread bans on New Years celebrations this year, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing recovery from the August explosion at the Port of Beirut that wreaked havoc on the city. However, as 2021 begins, it seems clear that some traditions won't be put away so easily.

As the clock strikes midnight on New Years Eve, cities around the globe have launched massive fireworks shows into the sky to ring in the new year. However, in Lebanon a lot more than just fireworks danced across the skies.

Early Friday morning, in the moments after the turning of the year to 2021, folks in Beirut naturally bade farewell to the old year and welcomed the new in with a bang.

Beirut 2021 ❤️ pic.twitter.com/6L3LT64sRc

— FADLALLAH (@FADLALL74662734) [December 31, 2020](#)

Someone looked for a bit of good luck from 2021, with 2020 having been such a miserable year, and decided to smash a plate. However, in the video, it's hard to tell if it broke on impact just by listening, thanks to a chaotic cacophony ringing across the city.

That rhythmic rat-tat-tat isn't firecrackers, though, nor are all the dashing lights dancing across the Beirut sky just fireworks. That's right, it's hundreds of people shooting automatic rifles into the sky.

What you see in this clip is a very small percentage of fireworks and the rest are heavy gunfire shooting towards the sky. 🇇🇵 #Beirut 🇇🇵 #HappyNewYear2021 pic.twitter.com/hKTT0tEj4H
— INTELsky (@Intel_Sky) [December 31, 2020](#)

What ensues looks like a combat zone, with would-be anti-aircraft guns firing at invisible strike aircraft. However, for the Lebanese capital, [this kind of celebration is actually routine](#). [Back in 1981, the Lebanese government](#) actually tried to ban the practice, since all those bullets that go up must eventually come down, and [when they do, they tend to hit people](#) scattered across the capital.

However, the ban has rarely been adhered to. [According to Arab News, a ban on firing guns](#) in the air was joined this year by bans on social gatherings, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic. At least one of those rules clearly was not obeyed.

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Photo: Chinese Navy Ship Tests Out New Dock in Downtown Hong Kong
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been rushing to meet its annual drilling requirements after the COVID-19 pandemic halted exercises at the start of 2020. For the PLA's garrison in the southeastern city of Hong Kong, that has meant naval, aerial and marine drilling across the region.

On Thursday, the People's Liberation Army's Hong Kong Garrison tested out a new facility downtown, dispatching an auxiliary vessel to dock there.

[According to a garrison spokesperson quoted by China Military Online](#), the ship Nanjiao 88 was “debugging and testing relevant facilities” at the Central Military Dock on the north shore of Hong Kong island, “and the ship's berthing is part of the relevant testing work.”

Someone across the bay spotted the ship on Thursday, incorrectly identifying the auxiliary as a “PLA battlecruiser.”

The 150-meter long dock was the last Hong Kong facility to be handed over to the PLA by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government after the implementation of the new national security law, which for the first time included Hong Kong. [At the September 29 handover, Hong Kong SAR Chief Executive Carrie Lam](#) urged that the PLA would only use the dock on a “discretionary basis.”

The Hong Kong Garrison’s primary naval facility is on Stonecutters Island, off the western side of the Kowloon Peninsula.

[Unnamed military experts told the Global Times](#) at the time the downtown dock would “help the PLA deal with terrorism-related activities and meet China's actual needs amid frequent foreign interference in Hong Kong affairs.”

In the years prior to the implementation of the new security law in late June, the former British colony was rocked by militant protests [with extensive foreign backing, including by the United States’](#) National Endowment for Democracy, an organization with deep ties to the CIA. After the security law blocked opposition groups from receiving outside financing, [the largest and most influential, Demosisto](#), almost immediately folded.

US Ships No Longer Welcome?

US naval vessels have long enjoyed the privilege of docking at Hong Kong, but in 2020, not a single American warship called to port in the city. In 2019, only two US ships were allowed to dock there, while Chinese authorities turned down six US requests.

In January 2020, the Hong Kong government [terminated the lease on Fenwick Pier Fleet Arcade](#), the primary destination for US Navy personnel going ashore for half a century, saying the land needs to be redeveloped.

An anonymous PLA source [told the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post](#) on Wednesday that the US Navy’s so-called “freedom of navigation operations” (FONOPs) across parts of the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait have soured Chinese feelings on allowing them to use the port.

“It’s one of the things that caused the failure of the scheduled Military Maritime Consultative Agreement due to the big divergence between the two militaries,” the source said.

A FONOP involves a US or allied warship deliberately sailing through waters claimed by China or another country, such as Russia or Vietnam, whose claims Washington considers to be “excessive.” Their frequency has spiked in recent years and led to tense military situations, [such as one in 2018 in which a Chinese destroyer and an American destroyer](#) came within a few dozen meters of each other.

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‘Keep the Light On’: Scottish FM Sturgeon Tweets to EU ‘Scotland Will Be Back Soon’
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Scottish Parliament rejected UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's post-Brexit trade deal on Wednesday, and last month the Conservative leader smeared Scotland's devolved power as a "disaster" for the country.

As Western Europe rang in the new year, Scotland's first minister tweeted out a hopeful image for Scottish folks still sore about the UK's departure from the European Union.

"Scotland will be back soon, Europe. Keep the light on," Nicola Sturgeon, who also heads the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP), tweeted on Friday. The message concluded with emojis of the Scottish and European Union flags and hearts. In the photo, a projection against the Berlaymont building in Brussels, Belgium, home to the European Commission, the words "Europe" and "Scotland" intersect over a heart.

In the 2016 referendum that saw the United Kingdom vote to leave the European Union, every single constituency in Scotland voted to remain in the politico-economic bloc. However, just two years prior, Scotland also voted to remain in the United Kingdom in a historic vote on independence from London.

That said, continuing opposition to the Conservative government's Brexit plan by the SNP has seen growing calls for a new independence referendum for Scotland - something Sturgeon has pushed for in recent months. [In November, she hinted at potential legal action](#) if London attempts to block a new referendum in 2021.

Since 2014, opinions about remaining in the UK have shifted in Scotland, whose head of state has been united with the English crown since 1707. Since August, [polls have shown a majority now support separation](#) from London - a trend only helped by Johnson's insistence that [Scottish autonomy has been a "disaster"](#) and former Prime Minister Tony Blair's "biggest mistake."

On Wednesday, Johnson signed a new post-Brexit trade deal with the EU. Members of the devolved Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh [voted to "refuse consent" to the deal](#), saying it "would cause severe damage to Scotland's environmental, economy and social interests."

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Elderly US Man Sues State For Right to Touch Wife Amid COVID-19 Pandemic
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Prior to the lockdown, the 78-year-old man, who lives in the same retirement community as his dementia-stricken wife, was able to assist his partner by brushing her hair and sometimes even her teeth. Per the new state order, he is now banned from even touching his wife.

Gary Hein, a resident of the El Castillo retirement community in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and lawyer Pierre Levy were handed a legal victory earlier this week after filing a lawsuit against the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) and its COVID-19 public health emergency order pertaining to nursing homes.

According to the lawsuit, Hein, like other New Mexicans, was denied his constitutional right when he was disallowed daily visits with Anna Severine, his 80-year-old wife who lives in the

memory care unit of their retirement community. Hein claims the decrease in visits and lack of physical touch has accelerated her dementia-related decline.

State District Judge Matthew Wilson appeared to agree with Hein and Levy in his recent ruling, which grants Hein's request for a preliminary injunction and calls on the NMDOH to revise [the order's language](#) to consider the constitutional rights guaranteed to nursing home residents and their families.

"Loss of familial association for even minimal amounts of time constitutes irreparable injury," Wilson wrote on Monday, [as reported by the Santa Fe New Mexican](#). "Nothing, such as video conferencing, is a substitute for in-person, physical contact with a loved one."

Levy initially filed a complaint against the NMDOH in September after he was blocked from visiting his dying mother who lived in a specialty care area. While her death that same month ended his case, Levy and Hein later teamed up to file this ongoing lawsuit.

Levy detailed to the Santa Fe New Mexican that the lawsuit arose somewhat organically, as he ran into Hein several times over the years while visiting his mother in the memory care unit of the retirement home.

"He was frequently there and we became acquainted because he was devoted to his wife and I was devoted to my mother ... And both he and I wanted to make sure our respective family members had love, guidance and support," he said.

"The harm that Mr. Hein and Ms. Severine are suffering by being denied their right to association outweighs any burden on the Secretary to make sure that the Constitution is taken into account when executive orders are issued," Wilson added in his ruling.

However, New Mexico's health secretary also has the opportunity to update the government order and return to the court.

Hein told the court that he has not given up hope that he will be able to physically meet up with his wife, even though much of her "personality and life is leaving" due to dementia.

"I know if the tables were turned, she would be caring for me. She is the best thing that's ever happened to me in my life," [Hein told KOAT](#).

As of this article's publication, [the NMDOH](#) has logged 141,186 positive COVID-19 diagnoses out of 1,954,680 total novel coronavirus tests performed in the state since the contagious disease was identified. At least 2,436 related COVID-19 deaths have been recorded in New Mexico.

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UNAMID Peacekeeping Mission in Sudan's Darfur Ends
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) was a peacekeeping mission established by the UN Security Council (UNSC) in July 2017 as a joint UN-AU response to events in the war-torn region of Western Sudan.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres and AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat issued a joint statement Thursday announcing that while operations with the AU-UN hybrid peacekeeping mission have been brought to an end, the two entities will continue to support the region.

"The establishment of this unique hybrid mission was a historic undertaking, through which both organizations and a number of troop and police contributing countries and donors have been engaged in collective efforts to protect civilians and help build peace in Darfur," [the joint statement read](#).

"The Chairperson and the Secretary-General reiterate their commitment to continue assisting the Government and people of the Sudan in consolidating the gains made in the peace process and implementing the National Plan of Action on Civilian Protection."

[A Wednesday news release](#) issued by UNAMID noted that troops and police personnel of the mission will focus on "providing security" during its "phased, six-month drawdown period." During this period UNAMID - composed of 4,005 military personnel, 1,631 formed police unit officers and nearly 2,000 additional staffers - will repatriate troops, vehicles and related equipment.

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

UN-AU forces were deployed in Darfur in 2007 to bring a resolution to the conflict that erupted after rebels rose up against the government of then-Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in 2003.

[The UN reports](#) that some 300,000 individuals were killed and 2.7 million others were displaced amid the conflict.

The UN mandate, [per Resolution 2148 of the UNSC](#), required UNAMID to "protect civilians, without prejudice to the responsibility of the Government of Sudan" and "facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance and ensure the safety of humanitarian personnel."

According to mission data, at least 288 civilian and uniformed UNAMID personnel were killed over the past 13 years. The UN notes that 73 of the fatalities "were the result of malicious acts."

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Joe Exotic's Legal Team Traveling to Washington, DC, for 'High Level' Meeting
Netflix/

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this month, the 57-year-old penned a letter to Kim Kardashian West, pleading for the American socialite to use her passion for social justice and connections with US President Donald Trump to obtain a pardon from the outgoing administration.

[TMZ reported Thursday](#) that Eric Love, who heads Joe Exotic's legal team, will be taking a private jet from Ft. Worth, Texas, to Washington, DC, for a "high level" meeting tied to their ongoing pardon petition.

According to the source, Joe Exotic's legal team's meeting will coincide with Congress' January 6 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.

While the US president unveiled 26 pardons on December 26, the report details "there's a buzz in DC" that Trump may announce additional presidential pardons on January 6 as a distraction from the vote.

Exotic - real name Joseph Maldonado-Passage - rose to fame earlier this year due to the Netflix miniseries "Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness."

The series debuted on March 10, around the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, and quickly became the quarantine obsession of many Americans, including Kardashian West. After seeing Kardashian West and friend Jonathan Cheban's "Tiger King"-themed Halloween costumes, the 56-year-old [wrote to the socialite](#), attempting to see if she could use her connections with the US president to negotiate a pardon similar to that of Alice Marie Johnson - a 65-year-old great-grandmother who was granted clemency after serving 22 years in federal prison for a first-time drug offense.

"I know you have never met me and may never want to however I do believe that you hold the values of our justice system dear to your heart ... Please help me by just taking 10 minutes out of your life and placing a call to President Trump to look at my 257-page pardon," he pleaded. The 56-year-old is currently [serving out a 22 year sentence](#) after a federal jury convicted him of two counts of murder-for-hire, eight counts of violating the Lacey Act for falsifying wildlife records, and nine counts of violating the Endangered Species Act.

Prior to incarceration, Exotic was a vocal supporter of Trump and even paid \$1,000 for a meet-and-greet at a Trump campaign site outside Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, [according to TMZ](#).

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Pence Asks Court to Reject Republican Bid to Ensure He Determines Elector Slates - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Mike Pence is asking a federal court to dismiss a Republican-led lawsuit against him that seeks to ensure he will determine which Electoral College slates to count when Congress convenes on January 6, a court document revealed.

On Monday, US Congressman Louie Gohmert and 11 electors from Arizona - all Republicans - filed a suit arguing Pence has the authority under the 12th Amendment to determine which of the so called "dueling" elector slates from contested US states will be taken into account by Congress.

"The relief requested by plaintiffs does not properly lie against the Vice President, and plaintiffs' suit can be resolved on a number of threshold issues," the court document said on Thursday. "For the foregoing reasons, the Court should deny plaintiffs' request for expedited declaratory judgment and emergency injunctive relief against the Vice President," the document said.

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Office of Management and Budget Rejects Biden's Claims of Obstructing Transition

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) dismissed as false President-elect Joe Biden's statements in which he accused the OMB of obstructing the presidential transition process.

Biden singled out earlier the OMB and the Defense Department as two government entities putting "roadblocks" for his team during the presidential transition.

"The Biden Transition Team has been making false accusations about OMB," the agency's Director Russ Vought said via Twitter and attached a letter about the issue.

Vought noted that OMB has "moved swiftly" to apportion \$9.9 million for transition activities, allowing the incoming administration to hire a transition team and utilize volunteers.

"We have taken more than 45 meetings with your staff to discuss specific issues, operational questions, and more," Vought said.

Although the Trump administration has authorized the presidential transition, President Donald Trump has pledged he will not concede and continues to dispute the 2020 election results, saying the election was stolen via massive fraud and acts of impropriety.

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US Senator Perdue in Quarantine as Key Run-off Vote Approaches Tuesday - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - US Senator David Perdue is in quarantine after coming in close contact with an individual infected with COVID-19, his campaign said in a statement on Thursday.

"This morning, Senator Perdue was notified that he came into close contact with someone on the campaign who tested positive for COVID-19," the campaign said in the statement. "Both Senator Perdue and his wife tested negative today, but following his doctor's recommendations and in accordance with CDC guidelines, they will quarantine."

Perdue, a Republican from the state of Georgia, will now be forced to cancel his re-election campaign events ahead of the crucial Senate runoff vote on Tuesday.

Georgia's two Senate runoff races, which pit Perdue and Republican incumbent Senator Kelly Loeffler against Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, will determine the balance of power in the Senate. Democrats will need to win both of the Senate seats to hold a 50-50 majority, with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris casting tie-breaking votes in the chamber.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) –

PUTIN'S NEW YEAR ADDRESS

* The coronavirus pandemic is not over yet, the fight against it does not stop for a second, but in 2021 Russians will be able to overcome all difficulties and restore normal life through their common effort, Russian President Vladimir Putin said in his traditional New Year address on Thursday.

* Putin praised the responsible approach of emergency services staffers, peacekeepers, army and fleet as well as others during the coronavirus pandemic allowing the Russian citizens can calmly gather at home with their loved ones, inviting Russians to dream of peace, happiness and joy.

US-CHINA RELATIONS

* The United States is urging China to immediately release 10 Hong Kong activists who were sentenced in a Chinese court on charges related to the city's anti-government protests, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Thursday.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* The World Health Organization said on Thursday it had issued an emergency use validation for the vaccine against the coronavirus developed by the Pfizer and BioNTech companies, the first one since the start of the pandemic.

* The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) told Sputnik on Thursday it continued to work with Hungarian regulators on the approval of coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V, and is ready to supply the vaccine in the required amount in January-March 2021.

* The US Army health clinic in Hohenfels, Germany has started its COVID-19 vaccinations of healthcare workers and first responders, the Defense Department said in a press release.

MICROSOFT ON CYBER HACK AGAINST US

* US tech giant Microsoft said in a blog post on Thursday that hackers who breached the SolarWinds tech company were able to view its source code when they carried out a wide-ranging cyber intrusion of US government agencies.

US-IRAN TENSIONS

* US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Cale Brown on Thursday urged the social media platform Twitter to take action against an Iranian general's post in which he issued death threats to the United States' leadership.

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Winter Cold Threatens 300,000 Afghan Children With Illness, Death - Relief Group

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - More than 300,000 Afghan children face freezing winter conditions that could lead to illness, in the worst cases death, without proper winter clothing and heating, the international relief charity Save the Children warned in a press release on Thursday.

"The early snow in the northern parts of Afghanistan where we work has impacted children particularly badly. The most vulnerable children are those whose schools have shut because of the worsening winter conditions. Their families don't have the money to buy winter clothing. Instead children are forced to huddle at home to escape the bitter cold," Save the Children Afghanistan Director Chris Nyamandi said in the release.

With schools are closed until March in the coldest parts of Afghanistan where the temperature can plummet as low as minus 27 degrees Celsius, the classroom often provides the only source of warmth for children in the winter, the release said.

The ongoing conflict has also destroyed many homes and forced thousands of children to shelter in camps for the homeless. There they risk hunger, disease, including COVID-19, even death from freezing temperatures, the release added.

Save the Children, which has been active in Afghanistan since 1976, said it plans to distribute kits including fuel, a heater, blankets and winter clothes to 100,000 families in 12 of the nation's 34 provinces along with shelter repair kits and 12 weeks rent for families facing eviction.

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US Apprehends 3.5M In Immigrants at Mexico Border From 2014 to 2019 – DHS

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) – The US Customs and Border Protection agency apprehended 2.8 million immigrants crossing the Mexican border in the five-year period ending in 2019 plus an additional 725,000 people judged ineligible for US entry at ports of entry, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a report on Thursday.

"Repatriations accounted for 51 percent of encounters (or 1.8 million) versus 49 percent of encounters (or 1.7 million) that had no confirmed departure, including 8.1 percent that had been granted relief or other protection from removal (284,000 encounters)," the department said in press release accompanying the report.

Of the 2.1 million single adults apprehended, 92 percent were deported and 8 percent allowed to remain in the US, the release said.

Apprehensions of family units totaled about 1 million, of which 56 percent were deported and 44 percent allowed to stay, the release added.

Of 284,000 unaccompanied children from countries other than Canada and Mexico, just 13,000 were deported while another 47,000 had final orders of removal but had not left the United States, according to the release.

The Trump administration crackdown on illegal immigration focused on the southern US border with Mexico, with the construction of about 400 miles of a wall and tougher restrictions on aliens seeking political asylum, mainly from Central America.

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Trump Cuts Florida Trip Short to Return to White House - Press Pool

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump on Thursday ended his trip to Florida a day early than planned to return to the White House, according to a press pool report.

Trump ignored shouted questions from the press about Iran and his plans for President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration.

Trump is reportedly concerned that Iran may be planning an attack against US forces in the Middle East region as retaliation for the US drone strike that killed top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani a year ago.

Another factor in his decision to cut his trip short could be the upcoming Electoral College verification process in Congress on January 6. Trump has been lobbying lawmakers to challenge the results of the election.

The US president was previously expected to attend a New Year's Eve party at Mar-a-Lago on Thursday night.

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US Begins Vaccinating Workers for COVID-19 at Military Hospital in Germany – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) – The US Army health clinic in Hohenfels, Germany has started its COVID-19 vaccinations of healthcare workers and first responders, the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

“The arrival of the Moderna vaccine paves the way for a phased vaccine distribution plan to protect our military communities overseas against COVID-19,” the release said. “Initial vaccinations will be limited to healthcare workers and first responders to assess the process and will be used to plan expanded distribution, where each service will request and administer the vaccine through a Defense Department-wide phased vaccination approach.”

The first inoculations took place on Thursday, the release said.

All US military personnel will continue to practice existing COVID-19 mitigation measures such as mask wearing, physical distancing and hand washing because a large but unknown portion

of the population will need to be vaccinated before risk from the disease diminishes, the release added.

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US Recalls Only Aircraft Carrier from Middle East Despite Iran Tensions

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - The only US aircraft carrier deployed in the Middle East has returned home despite heightened tensions with Iran, the Pentagon said on Thursday. "Following its role in providing support to American troops in Somalia and the arrival of follow-on operational capability, Acting Secretary of Defense Chris Miller has directed that the USS Nimitz will transit directly home to complete a nearly 10-month deployment," the Department of Defense said in a statement.

The move that reduces US firepower in the region comes notwithstanding intelligence assessments that Iran may be plotting an attack on American targets in Iraq. Tensions are high in the region ahead of the first anniversary of the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in a US drone strike outside Baghdad last January 3.

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State Dept. Urges Twitter to Act Against Iran General's Threats Issued to US Officials

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Cale Brown on Thursday urged the social media platform Twitter to take action against an Iranian general's post in which he issued death threats to the United States' leadership.

"General Esmail Qaani, Qassem Soleimani's successor as leader of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Qods Force, is making death threats on Twitter against US officials. When will Twitter apply its terms of use to counter such brazen threats of terrorism?" Brown said. Brown attached a copy of presumably Qaani's publication warning the US President, CIA Director and the Secretaries of Defense and State that "the Islamic Republic will avenge the unjustly shed blood of Martyr Soleimani."

Tensions are high in the Middle East ahead of the first anniversary of Soleimani's assassination by a US drone strike outside Baghdad on January 3. The United States has accused Iran of plotting an attack on US targets in Iraq while Tehran has said it suspects the United States of fabricating a pretext for a regional war.

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Senate Majority Leader Again Blocks Bill to Provide Americans \$2,000 Relief Checks

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on Thursday blocked two efforts from his Democratic colleagues to hold an immediate vote to approve \$2,000 stimulus payments for Americans.

"This crisis has not affected everyone equally... our duty both to struggling Americans and to taxpayers is to focus on targeted relief that will have the maximum impact and help the people who need it the most," McConnell said on the Senate floor.

McConnell also blocked calls for an immediate vote regarding the stimulus payments on Tuesday and Wednesday.

President Donald Trump has been urging Congress to approve the \$2,000 stimulus payments, but, according to McConnell, he also wants lawmakers to attach legislation to repeal a law that protects tech companies from liability restricting or censoring third-party content online and to form a committee to investigate alleged voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election.

On Sunday, Trump signed a COVID-19 relief and government spending bill that provided \$600 stimulus checks for qualified taxpayers in the United States.

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Microsoft Says SolarWinds Hackers Were Able to View Its Source Code - Blog Post

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - US tech giant Microsoft said in a blog post on Thursday that hackers who breached the SolarWinds tech company were able to view its source code when they carried out a wide-ranging cyber intrusion of US government agencies.

"We detected unusual activity with a small number of internal accounts and upon review, we discovered one account had been used to view source code in a number of source code repositories," the blog post said. "The account did not have permissions to modify any code or engineering systems and our investigation further confirmed no changes were made."

In mid-December, reports emerged that hundreds of US federal government entities and companies had been targeted by a massive cyberattack, which was instantly blamed on a foreign actor by US media. The hackers reportedly got access by compromising the Texas-based SolarWinds software. The company provides remote information technology services around the world, including several US government agencies and the military.

Microsoft said they believe the cyber hack was done by a "very sophisticated nation-state actor." US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former Attorney General William Barr alleged that a hacking group with links to Russian intelligence was behind the intrusion but have not provided any evidence to back their claims.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has refuted claims of a recent cyberattack on US government agencies.

President Donald Trump has suggested that China rather than Russia may be responsible for the cyberattacks, adding that the scale of the cyberattacks had been exaggerated by the media and the situation was under control.

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US Extends Liquid Natural Gas Export Authorizations Through 2050 - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - The United States has extended the terms of five earlier approvals to export liquefied natural gas (LNG) until 2050, the Energy Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"The 2050 policy and subsequent extended authorizations lock in the long-term benefits of US LNG exports and provide yet another way to support the success of US LNG exporters abroad," Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette said in the release.

The term extensions apply to export facilities operated by Southern LNG in the state of Georgia, the Cameron LNG export facility in Louisiana, the Annova LNG project proposed in Texas, and Eagle LNG's two small-scale facilities in Florida, including the Maxville facility currently in operation, the release said.

The latest extensions bring export authorizations held by 18 US LNG projects to 2050, the release added.

US LNG export facilities rebounded from hurricane related closures in the fall following a COVID-19 related lull in the summer to set an all-time monthly record for shipments in November of 9.4 billion cubic feet per day (Bcf/d), according to the Energy Information Administration.

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Tiny Antibody From COVID-19 Immunized Llama Shows Promise Treating Humans - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - US military scientists identified a miniature antibody - a nanobody - produced by a llama that appears to work well in liquid or aerosol form, suggesting it could help protect a person from the novel coronavirus, the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"The researchers found that at least one of these nanobodies, called NIH-CoVnb-112, may be highly effective at preventing infections or detecting virus particles by grabbing hold of SARS-CoV-2 [Covid-19] spike proteins," the release said.

The nanobody disables the coronavirus by covering the teeth of the spike on the virus' surface, disabling the pathogen's ability to infect the patient, according to researchers at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences cited in the release.

The llama was vaccinated five times in 28 days with a purified version of the spike protein to produce the nanobody, the release said.

Nanobodies are a type of antibody about a tenth the weight of most human antibodies that are produced naturally by the immune systems of camels, alpacas and llamas, the release added.

Nanobodies are also more stable, less expensive to produce and easier to engineer than typical human antibodies, according to the release.

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New York State Renews Debt Collection Moratorium for 9th Time During Pandemic - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - New York State extended a freeze on collections of medical and student debt owed to the state through January 31, the ninth renewal of a moratorium due to the coronavirus pandemic, Governor Andrew Cuomo said in a press release on Thursday.

"Renewing the suspension on the collection of student and medical debt that is referred to the attorney general's office for an additional 31 days will help lessen the burden faced by so many families and businesses whose livelihoods have been affected by the pandemic," Cuomo said. New York Attorney General Letitia Jones renewed the moratorium - first imposed in March and renewed in April through November - to ease the financial burdens for due to the coronavirus pandemic, the release noted.

The policy has also automatically suspended the accrual of interest and the collection of fees on New York State's outstanding medical and student debt, the release said.

The moratorium covers debts owed to five state hospitals, five veterans' homes and student debt owed to state universities, the release added.

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US Calls on China to Immediately Release Jailed Hong Kong Activists - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - The United States is urging China to immediately release ten Hong Kong activists who were sentenced in a Chinese court on charges related to anti-government protests, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Thursday. "The United States strongly condemns the Shenzhen court's actions and calls for the ten members of the group who were sentenced to jail terms to be immediately and unconditionally released," Pompeo said in the statement.

The ten individuals are among 12 rights activists who were arrested off the coast of Hong Kong on August 23 while allegedly trying to flee to Taiwan by boat. A Chinese court on Wednesday sentenced the ten individuals after they allegedly admitted to having attempted to illegally cross the maritime border. Two others face no charges, as they are minors.

The 12 members of the activist group helped organize anti-government protests in Hong Kong in 2019, some of which led to vandalism and injuries to police officers.

The anti-governmental protests in Hong Kong this year revolved around a controversial security law adopted by China on June 30. According to Beijing, the legislation criminalizes activities related to terrorism, separatism, subversion of state power and collusion with foreign forces, while local pro-democracy activists and certain Western nations claim that the law undermines Hong Kong's civil liberties and democratic freedoms.

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Elected US Congresswoman to Miss January 3 Swearing In While Recovering From COVID-19

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - Republican Representative-elect Maria Salazar, a former journalist elected in November, assured supporters that she will survive COVID-19 but will miss the ceremonial swearing in of the next US Congress on January 3.

"I hope that you can forgive me as I have been unable to communicate through social media, but I was diagnosed with COVID-19. I am in quarantine at home & getting better each day," Salazar said via Twitter on Thursday.

Salazar, 59, a former journalist who spent decades with the Spanish television network Telemundo, defeated incumbent Democratic lawmaker Donna Shalala in the 2020 general election to join the state of Florida's delegation to Congress.

Salazar was admitted to a hospital last week with an irregular heartbeat, where she tested positive for the novel coronavirus and was discharged the next day to recover at home. Salazar is part of a class of Republican House candidates who defied expectations of a Democratic wave, leaving majority Democrats with one of the smallest margins ever in the next Congress. With several races still undecided, media reports suggest the Democratic majority could be as small as 11 seats.

At least 50 members of Congress from 25 states and the territory of Puerto Rico have tested positive for the novel coronavirus or coronavirus antibodies, according to media reports.

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Magnetic Mine Found on Oil Tanker Hull Offshore Iraq - Maritime Security Agency

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - A suspected magnetic mine was found attached to the hull of an oil tanker in the Persian Gulf offshore Iraq, the maritime security agency Dryad Global said in a statement on Thursday.

"Reporting indicates that the Liberian flagged MT POLA (IMO9493767) has identified the presence of a suspicious object attached to the vessel hull whilst conducting StS 6nm South Al Bakr Terminal offshore Iraq," the statement said. "Further reporting indicates that the object is suspected to be a limpet mine."

Dryad Global said in the statement that the crew and vessel are believed to be safe.

The incident occurred amid heightened tensions in the Middle East with the United States accusing Iran of plotting an attack on US targets in Iraq and Tehran saying Washington is fabricating a pretext for a regional war.

Iran has been repeatedly accused in the past of attacking vessels in the Persian Gulf, but it denied responsibility.

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US Intelligence Sees Signs of Iran's Attack Preparations - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - US intelligence agencies have seen indications of Iran's "advanced planning" for attacks on American targets in Iraq, though certainty as to its intentions is lacking, CNN reported on Thursday.

Tensions are high in the region ahead of the first anniversary of the assassination of Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani in an American drone strike outside Baghdad last January 3. "There has been a number of troubling indications of advanced planning and preparation for attacks in Iraq that appear aimed at US military and US interests," the broadcaster quoted an unnamed US defense official as saying.

Three officials told CNN that Iran has been moving additional weaponry into Iraq, including short-range ballistic missiles. The concern is significant enough for US troops to be taking additional protective measures, they said, without elaborating.

The report quoted unnamed officials as emphasizing that the Pentagon is not taking preparing any offensive action against Iran, and that US troop movements are aimed at deterring attacks, not launching a pre-emptive strike.

The US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced on Wednesday that two US B-52 strategic bombers made a show of force in the Middle East to deter potential attacks. Without mentioning Iran specifically, CENTCOM added that the deployment delivered a clear message to anyone who intends to harm Americans or American interests.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted on Thursday that intelligence data from Iraq indicates the US is plotting to fabricate a pretext for a war.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Down 2% in Unexpected Reprieve From COVID-19 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 31 (Sputnik) - Some 787,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, about 2 percent lower than the previous week, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, as the US job market experienced a reprieve from the coronavirus pandemic for a second straight week.

"In the week ending December 26, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 787,000," the department said in a news release. It raised claims in the previous week to December 19 to 806,000 from 803,000. That brought the latest week's claims down by 19,000, or 2 percent. Economists polled by US media forecast 833,000 claims for the week ended December 26.

The 787,000 filings were the lowest in four weeks.

Some analysts said the drop could be due to a year-end flux in data gathering.

"This is for the week ending December 26, which is obviously impacted by holidays and very tough to forecast because of that," said Adam Button, analyst at ForexLive. "I wouldn't take a signal from the data until January, when the work week gets back to normal."

Continuing weekly claims, reported with a one-week lag but sometimes considered a better gauge of the labor market, also fell to 5.2 million from a previous 5.3 million. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, was unchanged at 3.6 percent.

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

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

Notwithstanding the rebound, the economic outlook for the United States remains dire with a rash of new coronavirus infections reported across a nation with nearly 20 million COVID-19 cases since January and more than 340,000 fatalities from that. Hospitalization has also hit daily record highs of above 100,000 in recent weeks, even as vaccine development efforts have been showing promise.