

1/11/22 Tuesday

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New York Sees Dip in Covid Numbers as US Registers World-Record 1.3 Million New Cases
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Recent trends in the US' largest city suggest it might be past the worst of the latest COVID-19 outbreak being driven by the ultra-transmissible Omicron variant. However, the possible good news comes as the nation overall is seeing the highest numbers it's ever recorded.

New York City has seen a steady decline in numbers of daily new cases, deaths, and hospitalizations over the last week, according to data from the city's health department.

On January 8, the last day for which [data has been posted](#), the seven-day average of new cases has fallen from a January 2 high of 41,305 to 33,292; the average number of deaths peaked on January 6 at 61 and had fallen on the 8th to 56; and the average number of hospitalizations leveled off on January 3 at 883 before falling by the 8th to 665.

When the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, spread to the United States last month, New York was one of the cities that spiked into some of the country's worst-ever case numbers, alongside other cities like Washington, DC. [On December 28](#), the seven-day average for positive tests in the city was 20%, an astronomically high number, and 2% of the entire island of Manhattan - home to 1.6 million people - was infected.

However, the raw data on hospitalized cases is somewhat misleading, as Governor Kathy Hochul has admitted, as about half were admitted for "non-Covid reasons," even if they caught the virus once admitted, [she told reporters](#) last week.

A similar situation has developed across the country, where a record-high number of 145,982 Americans in hospitals have COVID-19. However, similarly to New York, [a sizable percentage](#) of those were not admitted for complications caused by a SARS-CoV-2 infection - more than half in some places, according to the [Washington Post](#).

Projections for the coming weeks are grim. [According to the Post](#), computer models predict a peak of between 275,000 and 300,000 hospitalizations, while the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [\(CDC\) has predicted](#) another 85,000 deaths by the end of the month. However, all estimates on peak cases seem to be off. On Tuesday, the US recorded a world record number of new cases for a single day: 1.4 million, which on the CDC's bar graph makes the previous waves of the pandemic look like little more than rounding errors.

The record shattered on Tuesday was set [just a week earlier](#) on January 3, when 1.03 million new cases were recorded. Before the Omicron wave began in December, the record stood at just 294,000, set on January 8, 2021, when the deadliest wave of the pandemic thus far hit the United States.

A total of 837,000 Americans have died of COVID-19 since the pandemic started, with the seven-day moving average on Tuesday being 1,633 deaths per day and rising sharply. The number has not appreciably fallen since September, when another wave of infections was caused by the Delta variant of the virus.

Despite the magnitude of the outbreak, US leaders [have totally dismissed](#) the possibility of a nationwide lockdown like those used to control prior waves of outbreak. Instead, mask-wearing and vaccination is being emphasized, along with some school districts shifting to online learning - although not without considerable pushback, as in Chicago, where the [militant teachers union](#) forced the issue on the lockdown-averse administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

In China, however, where the spread-stopping lockdown was invented and perfected in early 2020, targeted [lockdowns have remained key](#) to keeping Covid cases under a tight lid. Travel into and out of cities where just a handful of cases have been detected is severely restricted, and health officials are testing millions of residents per day in an attempt to isolate all cases of the disease.

As a result, just 192 cases were reported nationwide on Tuesday, [according to the Chinese](#) National Health Commission, 82 of which arrived from abroad, and with 74 of the locally transmitted cases being found in the city of Xuchang, Henan Province.

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Nicaragua, China Sign Treaties, Including BRI Memorandum, After Managua Drops Taiwan Relations

By - Morgan Artyukhina

A month after Nicaragua switched its recognition of the Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing, the two countries have signed several key agreements underpinning their new political relationship, including Managua's support of the Belt and Road Initiative.

A slew of treaties were signed on Monday by Nicaraguan and Chinese representatives in Managua on Monday, ahead of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's inauguration for a fourth term as president.

The documents included a political consultation agreement, a treaty on bilateral cooperation and diplomacy, a memorandum of understanding on cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and the 21st Century Maritime Cooperation, and the mutual waiver of visas for Chinese and Nicaraguan citizens carrying diplomatic passports or traveling for official business.

"We attach great importance to strengthening relations with brother countries. Therefore, we welcome the Ortega administration's decision to toughen cooperation with our nation," Cao Jianming, the vice-president of the Standing Committee at the Chinese National People's Assembly (NPA), said at the ceremony, [according to TeleSUR](#).

"In this meeting, we ratify the principles of socialism from the bases of Marxism-Leninism and the thinking of the leader Mao Zedong and our president Xi Jinping," Cao assured.

Ortega told Cao that Nicaragua has closely followed the Communist Party of China's achievements over the past century, including building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, eradicating absolute poverty, and successfully convening the sixth plenary session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, [according to Xinhua](#) News Agency.

Ortega's democratic socialist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) has long pursued social programs in the impoverished Central American country despite extensive resistance by the United States, including funding a ten-year proxy war against Ortega's government in the 1980s that eventually forced him from power. However, he was reelected in 2006 and has been reelected three times since, the most recent of which was in November 2021.

The US rejected the results of [the November vote](#), accusing Ortega of eliminating the opposition by arresting several candidates who had played key roles in fomenting violent riots beginning in 2018, which the [US funded and backed](#), hailing them as pro-democracy protests. On Monday, the Biden administration rolled out [punishing new sanctions](#) on Nicaragua, targeting central figures in Ortega's administration, dozens of mayors and lower officials, and the country's state-owned gold and petroleum mining industries.

Last month, Ortega's government began to turn further away from Washington, [pulling out of the](#) US-dominated Organization of American States and [dropping its relations](#) with Taiwan, a self-governing island that China regards as a province in rebellion.

On January 1, China opened its new embassy in Managua [and invited Nicaragua](#) to "take an active part" and join the Belt and Road Initiative "as soon as possible." The massive infrastructure megaproject is helping finance construction of roads, railways, ports, highways, and other civil utilities around the globe.

Pan Deng, executive director of the Latin American and Caribbean Region Law Center of China University of Political Science and Law, told the Global Times that many countries that were formerly European colonies have suffered continued underdevelopment and rely on the export of primary products to the industrialized nations, often their former colonial rulers.

"Dominated by the US, these countries have been forced to stay in the lowest end of the industrial chain," the Global Times wrote, summarizing Pan's points. "Their urgent needs are ridding themselves of their current position in the industrial chain designated by the US hegemony, breaking bottlenecks and improving infrastructure construction, and seeking potential cooperation in fields like carbon credits."

Although Nicaragua is a former Spanish colony, it was occupied by the United States from 1912 until 1933 to defend US interests. The final stage of the occupation was resisted by peasants led by Augusto Sandino, after whom Ortega's Sandinista Party took its name. After the US left, the corrupt Somoza family ruled Nicaragua on behalf of Washington for 50 years until being overthrown by the Sandinistas in 1979.

However, after Ortega was forced out of office in 1990 by a US-backed insurgency, a new era of US-directed neoliberalism created special export zones for shipping duty-free goods to the US. It created free trade zones in which [up to one-sixth](#) of Nicaragua's formal sector workforce is employed by local contractors who sell their manufactured goods to [US corporate buyers](#) like Wal-Mart, VF Jeans, Levi Strauss, Tommy Hilfiger, Nike and the Gap.

Roughly 60% of Nicaragua's exports go to the United States, most of which are apparel, rolled tobacco, and produce such as raw sugar and coffee, [according to data](#) collected by the OEC. At the start of the new year, China expanded its BRI relations with several countries in a similar situation, [including Morocco](#), a former French client state, [and Eritrea](#), a former Italian colony that was ruled by Ethiopia for decades before winning independence in 1991.

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North Korea Successfully Fired Hypersonic Missile During Tuesday Launch Attended by Kim Jong Un
By - Morgan Artyukhina

North Korea's Tuesday missile test was of a Hwasong-8 hypersonic missile, state media said on Wednesday morning, noting the test was personally observed by Kim Jong Un, chairman of the country's Central Military Commission.

The [Tuesday test](#) was the second in less than a week by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and third overall of a hypersonic weapon. [According to the](#) South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff, which tracked the missile's launch and flight, it flew more than 700 kilometers across the Sea of Japan and reached an altitude of 60 kilometers while reaching a speed of Mach 10, or more than 7,600 miles per hour.

According to Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the missile actually flew 1,000 kilometers, including 600-kilometer "glide jump flight," and accurately struck its target.

"The test-fire was aimed at the final verification of overall technical specifications of the developed hypersonic weapon system," KCNA said on Wednesday. "The superior maneuverability of the hypersonic glide vehicle was more strikingly verified through the final test-fire."

The Japanese Coast Guard said the missile landed in international waters and caused no damage. However, [Tokyo condemned](#) the test, saying the DPRK's actions "pose a threat to the peace and security of our country, the broader region, and the entire international community." The US also [condemned the launch](#), accusing Pyongyang of violating UN Security Council resolutions.

During [the previous test](#) on January 4, the DPRK said it successfully tested the rocket engine's functioning in winter conditions, as well as the hypersonic glide vehicle's ability to maneuver after detaching from the rocket - an ability that renders it virtually impervious to interception. However, that test only reached a speed of Mach 6, or six times the speed of sound.

The first test, [in late September](#), demonstrated the basics of the projectile's flight but came as the DPRK's chief envoy to the United Nations was speaking at the General Assembly, asserting the country's right to defend itself as well as its willingness to engage in peace talks.

The DPRK has been at war with South Korea and the US since 1950, when the US intervened in a Korean civil war. The fighting ended in 1953 with a ceasefire and the establishment of the demilitarized zone, but no permanent peace treaty has ever been signed and 28,500 US troops have continued to garrison South Korea. North Korea says it needs its ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons to guarantee its security in the absence of a peace treaty and US withdrawal.

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Taiwan Halts Training on US-Made F-16V Viper Fighters After Jet Crashes into Sea, Pilot Missing

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Taiwan's air force has grounded its entire fleet of F-16 fighters after one of its most advanced models plummeted into the sea on Tuesday afternoon, seemingly taking its pilot with it. According to Taiwan's [Central News Agency](#) (CNA), an F-16V "Viper" fighter disappeared off radar screens at 3:23 pm on Tuesday afternoon, about 30 minutes after taking off from Chiayi Air Base in southern Taiwan.

Visibility was good at the time of the crash, with visibility up to 7 nautical miles, Taiwanese Maj. Gen. Liu Hui-chien told reporters. A civilian observer on land reportedly saw the plane plummet into the sea, as did another Taiwanese pilot. The crashing pilot, Captain Chen Yi, was not seen ejecting from his aircraft before impact.

"The pilot was practicing simulated air-to-ground blasting, and visibility at that time was fine," [Liu told reporters](#). "When he proceeded to the part which required him to fire at a 20-degree angle, his plane rapidly slanted into the sea."

Liu said that safety checks were being conducted on all of Taiwan's 140 F-16 fighters and a round-the-clock search for Chen was taking place.

Surface water temperature in the northernmost parts of the South China Sea where Chen crashed [remains fairly uniform](#) year-round at around 28.8 degrees Celsius, meaning if he survived the crash, Chen at least won't face a danger of hypothermia.

The aircraft, identified as [serial number 6650](#), was delivered to Taiwan by the United States in December 1998 as an F-16A Falcon - one of the earliest models designed by General Dynamics in the 1970s, but sold to Taiwan as a second-rate fighter in the 1990s. However, [under a 2017 deal](#), the US was in the process of upgrading 144 of Taiwan's older F-16 fighters to become F-16V "Vipers," which included new avionics, radar, various cockpit improvements, and an automated ground collision avoidance system.

According to the [South China Morning Post](#) (SCMP), the crashed jet was one of 24 Vipers recently commissioned by the Taiwanese air force to boost its air defense. The autonomous island regularly scrambles its fighter jets to confront Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) aircraft flying from mainland China through airspace that Taiwan claims as its own. Such air defense identification zones (ADIZs) have no grounding in international law and the confrontations take place in international airspace, but are regularly reported in the [western press](#) as being "provocative" violations of Taiwanese airspace.

The more advanced jets have been rushed into service to confront Chinese fighters like the J-20, which outclass any aircraft used by the Taiwanese but which the PLAAF presently only has in small numbers.

The government in Taipei is all that remains of the Republic of China formed in 1912 when the last Chinese emperor abdicated the throne. In 1949, a decades-long civil war with the insurgent Red Army led to the Republic's defeat on the mainland, the establishment of a socialist People's Republic of China in Beijing, and the PRC's claim to be the new and sole legitimate Chinese government and that Taiwan is a Chinese province in rebellion. However, the RoC continues to claim it is the real Chinese government.

Gradually, most nations have switched their recognition from the Taipei government to Beijing, including the US, which signed a series of agreements in the 1970s and 1980s stipulating its agreement with the One China Policy. However, Washington has [continued to informally support](#) the Taiwanese government, including selling it [billions of dollars](#) of weapons to fend off a theoretical Chinese invasion.

In addition to upgrading Taiwan's older F-16s to be Viper equivalents, the US has also agreed to sell Taiwan [66 factory-built Viper](#) fighter jets.

In October 2020, [Taiwan also grounded](#) all of its Northrop F-15E Tiger II jets, another fighter sold to them by the US in the 1990s, after one crashed moments after takeoff. The pilot drowned after getting tangled in his parachute during ejection.

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Miami-Bound American Airlines Flight Grounded in Honduras After Man Enters Cockpit,
Damages Controls
By - Evan Craighead

An American Airlines flight bound for Miami, Florida, out of Honduras' Ramón Villeda Morales International Airport was grounded Tuesday night after a passenger reportedly rushed into the aircraft cockpit prior to takeoff and damaged some of the plane's controls.

American Airlines issued a same-day confirmation that an incident occurred on the carrier's Flight 488, from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, to Miami, Florida, involving a single individual who is now in custody.

"A customer entered the open flight deck and caused damage to the aircraft. Crew members intervened and the individual was ultimately apprehended by local law enforcement," the Texas-based airliner said in a statement to The Hill.

A replacement aircraft was issued by the company, which rescheduled the flight for 9:30 p.m. local time.

"We applaud our outstanding crew members for their professionalism in handling a difficult situation," the American Airlines statement noted.

Although details about the incident were not shared, ABC News transportation reporter Sam Sweeney tweeted that a pilot had attempted to block the male suspect from jumping out of an open cockpit window while the plane was on the ground.

Footage uploaded to social media showed what appeared to be a man dangling out the cockpit window of an American Airlines jet.

An alleged photo of the damage caused by the suspect was also included.

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'What an Idiot': Hot Mic Catches Fauci Criticizing GOP Lawmaker During Heated Congressional Hearing

By - Evan Craighead

On Tuesday, Dr. Anthony Fauci engaged in a contentious exchange with GOP Sen. Roger Marshall, who pressed the leading US expert on infectious disease about the former's hefty six-figure salary, research, and the multibillion-dollar budget he manages as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

A hot microphone caught Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical adviser to US President Joe Biden, speaking offhand following a heated interrogation by GOP Senator Roger Marshall of Kansas. Fauci was heard on a hot mic to describe Marshall as a "moron."

"As the highest-paid employee in the entire federal government [...] would you be willing to submit to Congress and the public a financial disclosure that includes your past and current investments?" asked Marshall during a Senate Health Committee hearing regarding the US COVID-19 response.

Marshall acknowledged that Fauci's salary was provided to Congress by his colleagues, including Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"All you have to do is ask for it," Fauci fired back. "You're so misinformed, it's extraordinary."

Marshall proclaimed that, due to the nature of Fauci's job, there is a perception that the latter is being made aware of certain information before members of Congress. The US senator qualified that he personally believes that "is not the case."

"There's an air of appearance that maybe some shenanigans are going on," Marshall suggested during the Senate hearing with Fauci.

While Marshall claimed that his office could not find Fauci's financial disclosures, the latter repeatedly pointed out that all of the information the Republican requested is readily available to the public.

"What a moron," Fauci was overheard saying shortly after the Republican senator asked his last question, adding, in apparent exasperation, "Jesus Christ."

Both sides have since commented on the situation. Marshall later stated that, while calling him a moron "may have alleviated the stress" Fauci was feeling, "it didn't take away from the facts."

The GOP senator did not elaborate on what facts he was referring to.

Ian Sams, a spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services, argued that it's "frankly unacceptable" for GOP lawmakers to use a US Senate hearing to spread "conspiracy theories and lies about Dr. Fauci, rather than how we protect people from COVID-19."

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GOP Senators Seek Answers as Biden's DoJ Reveals Formation of New Domestic Terrorism Unit

By - Evan Craighead

A top FBI official revealed on Tuesday that the agency has assessed racially- or ethnically-motivated violent extremism and violent anti-government extremism as the most "lethal" terrorist threats facing the US. Senators questioned the official on many fronts, including a purported FBI involvement in the deadly US Capitol riot.

Matthew G. Olsen, the head of the US Department of Justice's National Security Division, revealed in [opening remarks before the Senate Judiciary Committee](#) that the department would form a new Domestic Terrorism Unit to assist in combating a growing security threat.

The DoJ official detailed that the new unit would "augment our existing approach" established by National Security Division attorneys tasked with both international and domestic cases.

"The attacks in recent years underscore the threat that domestic terrorism continues to pose to our citizens, to law enforcement officers and elected officials, and to our democratic institutions," he said.

Olsen highlighted that DoJ-affiliated authorities have arrested and charged over 725 people—with 325 of those facing felony counts—for their roles in the deadly US Capitol riot on January 6, 2021.

"We have seen a growing threat from those who are motivated by racial animus, as well as those who ascribe to extremist anti-government and anti-authority ideologies," Olsen noted. Additionally, the FBI is seeking to identify and arrest an additional 200 suspects linked to the Jan 6, 2021, Capitol building breach, according to [Jill Sanborn](#), executive director of the FBI's National Security Branch.

Word of the unit's formation comes just days after the one-year commemoration of the violent and deadly attack by supporters of then-US President Donald Trump against the US Capitol building and its inhabitants.

Olson also made reference to the [2019 mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas](#), which was carried out by a lone gunman and resulted in 23 deaths. Most of the victims were LatinX. Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL), the senate majority whip and chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, opened the hearing with a video compilation that included live footage and news reporting of the deadly insurrection, which took place shortly after then-US President Donald Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally, protesting the results of the 2020 presidential election.

"They are normalizing the use of violence to achieve political goals," Durbin pointed out.

Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) responded to Durbin by showing a video of unrest in Portland, Oregon, and other parts of the US following the police killing of Minneapolis resident George Floyd.

"Those anti-police riots rocked our nation for seven full months," [Grassley suggested](#), adding his claim that the "riots caused terrible damages: nearly 2 billion dollars' worth."

Sanborn highlighted during the hearing that the FBI has opened over 800 cases related to the summer 2020 riots cited by Grassley. More than 250 arrests have been made since.

When asked whether any confidential informants of FBI agents participated in the January 6, 2021, riot, Sanborn told Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) that she would not "go into the specifics of sources and methods."

The security official also declined to answer whether any agents or informants "committed crimes of violence" on January 6, 2021, or "actively encourage and incite crimes of violence."

"Who is Ray Epps?" Cruz asked, as he presented visuals of a person reportedly named Ray Epps, a former Marine, who took part in the insurrection and has become the focal point of conspiratorial claims linking federal agents to the attack on the US Capitol building.

Sanborn refused to answer the question, as well as several others posed by Cruz about Epps.

"On the night of January 5th, 2021, Epps wandered around the crowd that had gathered and there is video out there of him chanting 'tomorrow, we need to get into the Capitol,'" Cruz alleged. "This behavior was so strange that the crowd began chanting, 'Fed, Fed, Fed, Fed, Fed, Fed.' Ms. Sanborn, was Ray Epps a Fed?"

Epps, an Arizona resident, has not been charged with a crime in connection with the January 6, 2021, riot.

The Texas senator went on to claim that Epps was one of several individuals the [FBI was seeking information on in a January 8, 2021, memo](#). Cruz used another visual aid to point out that Epps was later removed from the FBI list, without reason.

One gray area identified during the hearing related to the definition of a domestic terrorist.

"While there is no single federal crime labelled 'domestic terrorism,' the criminal code does define 'domestic terrorism,'" Olsen noted in his opening remarks. "This definition provides us with expanded authorities, including enhanced sentencing for terrorism offenses."

The FBI's Sanborn noted that there were four domestic terror attacks conducted by domestic violent extremists last year, resulting in 13 deaths.

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Unamused, Billie Eilish Slams Producer Benny Blanco Over TikTok Trolling of Charlie Puth
By - Evan Craighead

Benny Blanco, the US producer responsible for Billboard hits like Ke\$ha's "Tik Tok" and Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl," has spent the past several months laying into singer-songwriter Charlie Puth via social media. It remains unclear what led to Blanco's posts, which mock Puth, his knowledge of music theory, and his recent single, "Light Switch."

Billie Eilish, 20, took to social media over the weekend to come to the defense of Puth, 30, who appears to have been bullied for at least six months by Blanco, 33.

The Grammy award winner's Tik Tok video included a clip previously uploaded to the platform by Blanco.

"You're a f*cking loser, Puth. Look at you," the 33-year-old said. "You sit in a room all day and make TikToks."

Eilish, visibly unamused, issued her own shade at the famed record producer: "What do you do all day, Benny? The same thing. Literally, the same thing."

Puth spoke out about Blanco's videos back in November, stating that while the "videos were really funny at first," the TikTok posts now "genuinely hurt my feelings."

"I used to look up to you," Puth said, "and I don't know where all this is coming from."

Blanco and Puth have previously collaborated and [went live together on Instagram in 2020](#), leading some to pan the feud as an attempt to generate buzz.

Puth has yet to comment on Eilish's involvement in the purported online spat.

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Biden Administration Clears Five Guantanamo Bay Detainees for Transfer
By - Nevin Brown

The US government has granted the transfer of five detainees from the military base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The facility turned 20 years old on Tuesday, and still houses 39 detainees, with 21 yet to be cleared for transfer.

The Biden administration has stated its goal of closing the prison permanently. However, the process of releasing and then transferring prisoners is complicated and fraught with potential pitfalls.

The Periodic Review Board is tasked with determining which detainees are cleared for release and transfer. The panel consists of representatives from different US national security agencies. The prisoners' crimes, alleged crimes, and behavior, are all taken into account before a release is granted. Before a prisoner can be transferred, the US must negotiate with their home nation's government, or a third party, to allow their release.

Guled Hassan Duran, Moath al-Alwi, Suhail al-Sharabi, Zakaria al-Baidany and Abdulmalik Bajabu have been identified as the five detainees approved for transfer. None of the men have been charged with a crime.

Duran was deemed a crucial member of East Africa al-Qaeda*. He was captured in 2003 in Djibouti, reportedly in the alleged final stages of plans to carry out terrorist activities in the region. He is a Somali national.

[According to his attorney](#), and documented in a Senate Intelligence Committee report released in 2014, Duran was tortured at CIA black sites.

Duran's clearance for transfer was granted on November 10 but does not contain the rationale for the decision.

Zakaria al-Baidany, who was also tortured at CIA black sites, was granted clearance on December 27.

According to the review board, "There is no information indicating that the detainee engaged in activities against the United States prior to detention."

Moath al-Alwi, was granted his release by the review board at an unspecified time. The board noted his "lack of a leadership position in al-Qaeda or the Taliban*" and factored in his "highly compliant behavior" as reasons for his release.

Abdulmalik Bajabu, accused of having ties to East Africa al-Qaeda, was arrested by Kenyan authorities in 2007. He was one of the five final detainees to arrive in the military prison.

The Kenyan national was deemed to have a "low level of training and lack of leadership role in his pre-detention activities," according to the panel.

The final of the five detainees granted their release, Suhail al-Sharabi, was accused of serving as a bodyguard to Osama bin Laden. The Yemeni has also been accused of belonging to al-Qaeda.

Al-Sharabi has been at Guantanamo Bay for close to two decades. The panel did not reveal their rationale for approving his transfer.

At its height, the military prison at Guantanamo Bay housed hundreds of male prisoners. Now, under 40 detainees are housed in the facility. With the US war in Afghanistan officially over, Guantanamo Bay remains a final reminder of America's costly War on Terror.

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Enter the Milk-trix : Farmer Finds Cows Strapped Into Virtual Reality Produce More Milk
By - Nevin Brown

A Turkish farmer made headlines by strapping virtual reality (VR) headsets onto his cows to simulate greener pastures. The VR-induced cow reportedly was less anxious, happier, and produced more milk.

Izzet Kocak got the idea to use VR headsets to simulate a green pasture for his cow from a project conducted in Russia. [According to a report from Engadget](#), the results from the Russian project had yet to yield better milk, but they did yield happier cows.

If Kocak's early findings are shown to be replicable, VR dairy farms could produce the milk of the future.

Through a translation, Kocak told reporters, "They are watching a green pasture and it gives them an emotional boost," adding that his cows appear to be "less stressed."

While the cows may appear to be happier, Kocak, and dairy farmers around the world, have reason to smile as well. "We get an average of 22 liters of milk per day from the cows in our farm, the milk average of the two cows [that] wore virtual reality glasses was up to 27 liters," the farmer said.

Those figures represent a 22.7% daily increase in milk production and are [supported by research conducted at Wageningen University in the Netherlands](#). There, researchers found that happiness led to healthier cows, and healthier cows led to improved milk quality and amounts. If repeatable in other cows, VR could represent an economic and environmental shift for the dairy industry, allowing, according to some, increased milk yields using less land and resources. It's a solution, according to dairy industry boosters, that offers the potential to be economically and environmentally feasible.

The news of VR being used on farm of confined cows to increase milk yields has, however, raised concerns, with some likening the practice to the dystopian future displayed in the Matrix film franchise. Others, however, have pointed out that greener pastures currently exist for some lucky cows.

More research will need to be conducted, according to reports, to better understand the effects of VR on cows in the long term.

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GOP Leader Kevin McCarthy Considering Prohibiting Congressional Lawmakers From Trading Stocks

By - Nevin Brown

GOP House Minority leader Kevin McCarthy, if the GOP takes control of the House in the November midterm elections, is considering legislation to limit lawmakers from trading stocks while in office. The news comes shortly after House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) came out against such regulations.

[In an interview with the Punchbowl](#), McCarthy raised possible limitations he would look to enact.

An idea that has gained some traction is to force lawmakers to hold only professionally-managed mutual funds. Another proposal he is considering is a ban on lawmakers trading and owning stocks in companies or industries overseen by committees on which they sit.

McCarthy admitted that these plans are in their early stages, and it is unknown if it would gain enough traction if it came to a vote.

The conversation over lawmakers and their families trading stocks returned to the forefront following Pelosi's statement against such regulations.

When asked about instituting limits against lawmaker trading at a December 15, 2021, press conference, Pelosi said, "We're a free market economy, [lawmakers] should be able to participate in that."

Pelosi's husband, Paul, is an active trader. According to reports, over a five-day period, he purchased between \$1,750,007 and \$3,600,000 worth of stock.

The Stop Trading on Congressional Knowledge Act (STOCK Act), enacted in 2012, prohibits lawmakers and their aides from using non-public information for private profit. The act also requires a public disclosure of stock and bond transactions within 45 days.

Access to proprietary information by lawmakers, through security intel and/or policy, can affect markets and has led to some dubious acts. Some politicians were briefed over the dangers of the coronavirus pandemic well before the public was aware. A quartet of senators: Dianne Feinstein, James Inhofe, Richard Burr and Kelly Loeffler, reportedly traded activity on the information, prompting a Justice Department investigation.

The probes did not lead to any charges but highlighted how little oversight and accountability there is of lawmakers using their insider position to enrich themselves.

Lawmaker trading appears to be a bipartisan issue, and members of both parties are known to participate, leading many to suspect that McCarthy will face an uphill battle.

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Significant Fossil Discovery in Australia Sheds Light on Continent's Past And Future

By - Nevin Brown

A treasure trove of fossils discovered in Australia's outback sheds light on an era of abundant life in a region that is currently desolate. The extremely well preserved fossils contained new species, pollen spores, stomach contents and cells that will even allow scientists to know the color of the specimen.

The fossils, discovered at McGraths Flat, near the New South Wales town of Gulgong, have reportedly been dated as being between 11-16 million years old. The fossils prove that the region, now an arid desert, was home to an ancient rainforest.

[According to the Australian Museum \(AM\) and University of New South Wales \(UNSW\) paleontologist Dr. Matthew McCurry](#), “Many of the fossils that we are finding are new to science and include trapdoor spiders, giant cicadas, wasps and a variety of fish.”

McCurry added, “Until now it has been difficult to tell what these ancient ecosystems were like, but the level of preservation at this new fossil site means that even small fragile organisms like insects turned into well-preserved fossils.”

Associate professor Michael Frese, who first imaged the fossils, explained how the research team was able to achieve the findings’ deep level of detail: “Using electron microscopy, I can image individual cells of plants and animals and sometimes even very small subcellular structures.”

He added, “The fossils also preserve evidence of interactions between species. For instance, we have fish stomach contents preserved in the fish, meaning that we can figure out what they were eating. We have also found examples of pollen preserved on the bodies of insects so we can tell which species were pollinating which plants.”

The team was also able to reconstruct the color and patterns of birds and fish through the discovery of melanosomes.

The cache of fossils includes specimens of insects, spiders, birds, and fish and will better help scientists understand ancient ecosystems in the region and the ramifications of a rapidly changing climate.

The executive director for science at the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, David Cantrill, believes the discovery of the fossils could help Australia better understand its future.

“The McGraths Flat plant fossils give us a window into the vegetation and ecosystems of a warmer world, one that we are likely to experience in the future. The preservation of the plant fossils is unique and provides important insights into a time period for which the fossil record in Australia is rather poor,” Cantrill said.

The specimens resemble many of the animals and plants found in Australia’s northern rainforests. According to the prehistoric pollen samples, the region showed signs of drying out as the climate began to cool during an era known as the Miocene epoch. The period was a warmer geological era than today, but continued to cool, giving way to the Pleistocene epoch, commonly known as the Ice Age.

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Unprecedented National Blood Shortage in US Causes Crisis for Red Cross, Hospitals
By - Mary Manley

The Red Cross has declared its first national blood crisis in the US, forcing doctors to choose which patients will receive blood transfusions, and which patients will go without.

A [blood shortage](#) is causing hospitals to defer patients from major surgery, including those in need of organ transplants and cancer treatment.

As the Covid-19 pandemic rages, the Red Cross reported a [10% overall decline](#) in the number of people donating blood since March 2020, and a 62% drop in blood drives at schools and colleges. The shortage is made worse by issues such as staff shortages and blood drive cancellations.

The medical director for the Red Cross, Baia Lasky, said the combination of [winter weather](#) and Covid-19 cases are worsening an already dire situation.

“Please, if you are eligible, make an appointment to give blood or platelets in the days and weeks ahead to ensure no patient is forced to wait for critical care,” she urged.

If you’ve received a Covid-19 vaccine and wish to donate blood, in most cases there is no [deferral time](#). For those who received a live attenuated Covid-19 vaccine, or do not know what vaccine they received, the wait time to donate blood is two weeks.

The Red Cross is urging the public to [schedule a time](#) to donate blood, and has partnered with the [Super Bowl](#) to increase awareness about the urgent need for donations. Those who donate blood during January will automatically be entered to win 2 tickets to the upcoming Super Bowl LVI in Los Angeles, including round-trip air fare from anywhere in the US, hotel accommodations for two, a home theater system, and a \$500 gift card.

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US Breaks COVID-19 Hospitalization Record Including 4,462 Children, Unvaccinated Most at Risk

By - Mary Manley

The US broke its own earlier records in hospitalizations, as well as infections of COVID-19 on Tuesday, marking a considerable spike for those who are unvaccinated, including children aged 4 and younger who are not yet eligible to receive a vaccine.

The new [omicron](#) variant of the global Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic is responsible for a spike in infections, although symptoms - for those who have been vaccinated - are not as severe overall. Transmissibility, however, is significantly higher than the previous delta variant. Health officials cite poor protocols, unwilling 'antivax' citizens, and the US Food and Drug Administration [“dragging their feet”](#) as being responsible for the recent surge.

The US hit [1.4 million](#) daily cases as of Monday, with the [omicron](#) variant causing 98.3% of new Covid-19 cases in the US last week. The US overall saw a [56%](#) rise in new cases, a 21% rise in deaths, and a 21% rise in hospitalizations.

For [comparison](#), the biggest spike in January 2021 was 142,273 hospitalized. That number was broken Tuesday with 145,982 hospitalized.

The [biggest spike](#) in January 2021 for infections was 313,829 reported cases, with a 7-day average of 246,287; however, on January 11, 2022, the total reported cases were 449,310 with a 7-day average of 761,081.

On Monday, states including Colorado, Oregon, Louisiana, Maryland, and Virginia declared public health emergencies or [crisis standards of care](#), meaning, “when crisis conditions exist, the goal is to ‘gracefully degrade’ services to the minimum degree to meet the demands, maintaining the maximum patient and provider safety.”

In [California](#), 38% of hospitals are in crisis, and 43% expect a crisis this week.

In the US, continuing reports reveal hospital beds filling up, resulting in a severely taxed hospital staff. Many nurses and other medical employees diagnosed with COVID-19 are nonetheless expected to work.

“Our systems and personnel are under extreme strain and I’m not sure how long we can sustain it,” Russel Buhr, a pulmonary and critical care physician at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center told the [Washington Post](#) in an email.

The sharp rise in case numbers has shown up primarily among the unvaccinated.

US President Joe Biden delivered [remarks](#) on what he has been criticized for calling a “pandemic of the unvaccinated,” saying, “Be concerned about omicron, but don’t be alarmed. But if you’re unvaccinated, you have some reason to be alarmed.”

The president voiced his concern that unvaccinated patients can experience severe illness or “needlessly” die.

Dr. Mohammad Sobhanie, an infectious disease physician at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, has warned that a combination of the omicron variant being more transmissible and lax Covid safety protocols are responsible for the recent surges.

Forty percent of the country remains unvaccinated and only 36% have received a booster dose, according to Dr. Faheem Younus, chief of Infectious Diseases at the University of Maryland Upper Chesapeake Health.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky reported - during the ongoing surge of the delta variant - that unvaccinated people are six times more likely to test positive, nine times more likely to be hospitalized, and 14 times more likely to die from COVID-related complications.

“More than 75% of all hospitalized Covid-positive patients in the University of Maryland Medical System’s 12 hospitals are unvaccinated,” said Younus. “A majority of the remaining 25% have received 1 or 2 shots.”

S. Wesley Long, PhD researcher at Houston Methodist Hospital, reported that 43% of patients diagnosed with the delta variant strain of Covid-19 needed to be hospitalized with 5% of those dying. Whereas omicron sees percentages of 15% of patients needing hospitalization and 1% of people dying.

“Hospitals are filling with patients who have Covid-19 infections, most of whom are unvaccinated,” Dr. Greg Schrank MPH, hospital epidemiologist at the University of Maryland Medical Center, told [Healthline](#).

“Not only does this create a challenge in caring for the large numbers of Covid-infected people, but due to limited beds and resources, this can impact the ability to deliver care to people with other medical needs.”

Pennsylvania [reported](#) that 90% of their hospitalized Covid-19 patients are unvaccinated, and according to data from the [New York State](#) Department of Health, fully-vaccinated New Yorkers

have between a 90.2% and 95.7% lower chance of being hospitalized with Covid-19 compared to those who are unvaccinated.

The number of young children hospitalized for Covid-19 has reached peak levels since the beginning of the pandemic. The increase is among those aged 4 and younger who are not eligible for vaccination, according to Dr. Rahul Sharma, the emergency physician-in-chief at New York-Presbyterian Hospital.

Dr. Celine Gounder, a former advisory board member to the Biden administration, who spoke on NBC's "Meet the Press," said on [Sunday](#), "The FDA under both the Trump and Biden administration has really dragged its feet on authorizing these rapid antigen for the purpose of assessing 'are people contagious or not.'"

While the CDC has been criticized for recently changing its [recommended](#) isolation time periods from 10 days to five, the Biden administration also continues to face backlash from health experts and lawmakers over issues with testing availability. Biden at the White House on Monday relayed to reporters that he's confident that the US is on the "[right track](#)" in its efforts to slow growing rates in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The US currently has the highest total number of daily cases of any country worldwide, according to reports, with 1.4 million infections as of Monday.

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Americans See Frostbiting Freeze as Record-Breaking Lows Strike Nation
By - Mary Manley

For Americans in the Upper Midwest, the Great Lakes, and the Northeast, Tuesday came as a shock as millions woke up to unexpected wind chills - some as cold as -45 degrees Fahrenheit, the coldest weather to sweep the nation since January 21, 2019.

For those across [northern New England](#), air temperatures early in the morning were in the single digits and in some areas were dropping below zero, with wind chills creating temperatures as low as -35 degrees Fahrenheit.

On Tuesday, temperatures in [New York](#) only reached 22 degrees Fahrenheit, and for Boston that high was only 12 degrees Fahrenheit. Today is slated to be the coldest high for both regions since 2019. The record-breaking chill caused [Boston](#) to close public school classrooms.

Temperatures were so low they were visible on infrared satellite.

Local [news channels](#), including CBS Boston, warned people to stay indoors, as frostbite can occur within 30 minutes. Residents were also asked to check in on vulnerable family members, neighbors and pets, and to leave water taps running so pipes would not burst.

For those who live in areas surrounding the Great Lakes, [lake effect snow](#) alerts were in effect, resulting in a snow band reported to have stretched for 250 miles, from eastern Lake Ontario to western Massachusetts. Specified areas may see up to [2 feet](#) of snow as a result.

The temperatures are a stark contrast to past readings, especially considering the region experienced its [warmest December](#) on record, with Maine and New Hampshire having their second warmest years on record. As global warming due to human-induced climate change

continues without letup, the [six-warmest years](#) for the US since record-keeping began have all occurred since 2012.

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Stoltenberg Hopes NATO-Russia Council Could Convene Again Soon - Sherman

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed hope that the NATO-Russia Council could convene again soon to have "deeper discussions" on areas of interest where making progress is possible, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday.

Sherman's comment came after the NATO-Russia Council meeting on the security guarantees in Europe proposed by Moscow for the alliance not to expand further eastward, among other issues.

"Secretary General [Jens] Stoltenberg open today's meeting by expressing his hope that the NATO Russia Council could convene again soon to have deeper discussions on the areas where we can make progress together to strengthen security for all," she said.

Sherman added that the United States and NATO remain ready to continue to engage with Russia after the talks in Brussels on Wednesday.

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Sherman Says Hopes Putin Will Understand, Agree Diplomacy Right Path to Take

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday that she hopes Russian representatives at the NATO-Russia Council meeting will brief President Vladimir Putin and he will agree that diplomacy is the right path to take.

Sherman's comment came after the NATO-Russia Council meeting in Brussels on the security guarantees in Europe proposed by Moscow for the alliance not to expand further eastward, among other issues.

"Russia has a choice to make, I hope that both Deputy Foreign Minister [Alexander] Grushko and Deputy Minister of Defense [Alexander] Fomin will brief Putin and he will understand and will agree that diplomacy is the right path," Sherman said.

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Hard to See Nord Stream 2 Becoming Operational If Russia Advances on Ukraine - Sherman

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - It is very difficult to imagine the Nord Stream 2 pipeline becoming operational if Russia advances on Ukraine, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman told journalists on Wednesday.

Sherman was speaking after a Russia-NATO Council meeting, the first since 2019. The high-level delegations met in Brussels to discuss Russia's security proposals amid rising tensions over Ukraine.

"The Germans federal network agency has suspended certification, and Secretary [Antony] Blinken has said, which underscores what Undersecretary [Victoria] Nuland said to quote the secretary from our perspective, it's very hard to see gas flowing through the pipeline for it to become operational. If Russia renews its aggression on Ukraine," she said.

She noted that Washington has long been clear about the project.

"It is the Russian geopolitical project that undermines energy security and national security," she said.

In December, media reported that the United States is pressing Germany to halt the Nord Stream 2 pipeline should Russia invade Ukraine. However, the Kremlin said the pipeline was not mentioned during the virtual meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden in late 2021.

Nord Stream 2 is a joint venture of Gazprom, Royal Dutch Shell, OMV, Engie, Uniper and Wintershall. The project is designed to carry natural gas from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The pipeline was completed in September and is now undergoing certification in Germany, which has been stalled by the Federal Network Agency's demand to create a German subsidiary and then file a separate bid.

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NATO Collectively Preparing for Every Eventuality With Russia if Diplomacy Fails – Sherman

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – NATO members are collectively preparing for every eventuality with Russia if it walks away from the proposed diplomacy path in relations with the alliance and Ukraine, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday.

"If Russia walks away, however, it will be quite apparent they were never serious about pursuing diplomacy at all. That is why collectively we are preparing forever for every eventuality,"

Sherman said during a press briefing.

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Dialogue at NATO-Russian Council 'Clearly Began' on Wednesday - Sherman

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The dialogue of the NATO-Russian Council began on Wednesday and Russia had the opportunity to hear what the alliance's members other than the United States have to say, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman told journalists.

"Clearly, we began dialogue today," Sherman said.

Sherman also said it is also important that at the end of today's meeting Russia did not reject the idea of having more discussions with NATO.

"I am glad Russia was at the NATO summit and heard what other 30 states had to say," she added.

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US Imposes North Korea-Related Sanctions on Russian Company, 7 Individuals - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed North Korea-related sanctions on a Russian business and national alongside six North Koreans, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced on Wednesday.

OFAC added Russian company Parsek LLC, Russian national Roman Alar and six North Koreans to the Specially Designated Nationals sanctions list under the North Korea Sanctions Regulations.

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US, Allies United in Seeing Some of Russian Security Proposals as Nonstarters – Sherman

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – The United States and allies at a NATO-Russia Council meeting on Wednesday were united that certain core Russian proposals on European security are simply nonstarters, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday.

"The United States and our NATO allies were united in our responses to Deputy Foreign Minister [Alexander] Grushko and Deputy Minister of Defense [Alexander] Fomin in their comments, including when it comes to certain core Russian proposals, that are simply nonstarters," Sherman told a press briefing.

During the meeting, NATO allies offered their views on the areas where the alliance and Russia could make progress together to strengthen security for all and for the world, including reciprocal actions focused on risk reduction and transparency, communication and arms control, Sherman added.

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NATO-Russia Council Ended With 'Sober Challenge' to Moscow to De-Escalate – Sherman

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Wednesday's NATO-Russia Council meeting ended with a "sober challenge" from the alliance to Moscow to de-escalate amid growing tensions over Ukraine, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman.

"Today's meeting lasted nearly four hours. It ended with a sober challenge from the NATO allies to Russia," Sherman told a press briefing. "That challenge is to respond to the offers extended by the Secretary General of NATO, by the Polish chairman and office of the OSCE, by the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, and by the President of the United States, to deescalate tensions, choose the path of diplomacy."

Sherman noted that during the meeting Russia did not make any commitment to de-escalate nor did it state that it would not do so.

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Biden Boosts Supply of COVID-19 Test Kits to Schools to 10Mln Per Month - White House

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is increasing the supply of testing kits to schools in the United States to 10 million per month in order to keep them open amid the increase of coronavirus cases from the Omicron variant, the White House announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Through these new initiatives, the administration will increase the number of COVID-19 tests available to schools by 10 million per month," the release said. "These additional tests will help schools safely remain open and implement screening testing and test-to-stay programs."

With the additional tests, the Biden administration will make available to schools more than double the volume of testing that took place in schools across the United States in November of 2021, the release said.

"These efforts have resulted in 96% of schools open in-person in January 2022, up from 46% of schools in January 2021," the release added.

The Biden administration had also given \$130 billion to the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund to safely reopen schools and address students' academic and mental health needs and \$10 billion in the Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC) cooperative agreement to support testing for students and staff, according to the release.

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US Judge Rejects Prince Andrew's Bid to Dismiss Civil Sex Abuse Lawsuit - Court Document

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - A US judge has rejected a bid by British Prince Andrew to dismiss trial in a civil sex abuse case, court documents show.

"For the foregoing reasons, (the) defendant's motion to dismiss the complaint or for a more definite statement is denied in all respects," US District Judge Lewis Kaplan wrote in a 46-page opinion outlining the case brought against the royal by Virginia Giuffre.

The 61-year old prince is being sued by the 38-year-old over rape and sexual abuse that she says she was subjected to when she was 17. Andrew denies all allegations against him.

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US Consumer Prices Up 7% in Year to December, Biggest Jump in 40 Years - Labor Dept.
(Adds details, context in paras 3-10)

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices were up 7% in the year to December, indicating the fastest inflationary growth in four decades, the Labor Department announced on Wednesday.

"The all items index rose 7.0 percent for the 12 months ending December, the largest 12-month increase since the period ending June 1982," the department said in a news release, referring to the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers.

The data, known in short as the CPI Index, is closely watched by the Federal Reserve to determine the timing for the first pandemic-era interest rate hike.

The Fed dropped interest rates to virtually zero after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, keeping them at between zero and 0.25% over the past 20 months. The central bank has signaled that it will raise rates as many as three times this year, with the first hike likely coming between March and June.

The annual CPI growth for December fell squarely in line with the 7% forecast by analysts, while the month-on-month rise of 0.5% was just about the expected level of 0.4%. Wall Street stock figures jumped in advance of the market's 9:30 a.m. ET (14:30 GMT) opening, responding to the inflation readings which did not surprise either way to the upside or down.

"Evidently, the market was particularly fearful ahead of this report and that's coming out now with the numbers generally in-line with estimates," economist Adam Button said in a comment posted on ForexLive.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell said on Tuesday there will likely be rate hikes over time if inflation continues to exceed forecasts. "The economy no longer requires extremely accommodative policy," Powell told a Senate hearing held to confirm the extension of his term until 2024.

He, however, stressed that the central bank "must be humble and nimble" in tightening monetary policy after being overly-accommodative in the past two years. Powell cited the inconsistent pace of US job gains as his worry, despite the labor market achieving within 20 months of the COVID-19 breakout the Fed's target of "maximum employment" through the December jobless rate of 3.9%.

The United States lost around 20 million jobs at the height of the pandemic, reaching a record unemployment of 14.8% by April 2020.

The economy itself shrank by 3.5% in 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis. The Fed has projected a 5.5% growth for 2021 and 4% for 2022. The central bank's problem though is inflation, running at four-decade highs as prices of almost

everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic due to higher wage demands and supply chain disruptions.

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South Korea Approves Novavax COVID-19 Vaccine - Company

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - South Korea has approved the Novavax coronavirus vaccine, the American biotechnology company said on Wednesday.

"Novavax... and SK bioscience, Co. Limited, a vaccine business subsidiary of Korea-based SK Group, today announced that South Korea's Ministry of Food and Drug Safety (MFDS) has approved a Biologics License Application (BLA) from SK bioscience for Nuvaxovid™ COVID-19 Vaccine (recombinant, adjuvanted) for active immunization in individuals 18 years of age and older for the prevention of COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2," the company stated.

The vaccine will be manufactured and marketed in South Korea by SK Bioscience.

"Novavax is proud to bring our COVID-19 vaccine to South Korea at a critical time in the pandemic as both the Delta and Omicron variants have taken hold," Stanley Erck, president and CEO of Novavax, said.

In December, the World Health Organization recommended Nuvaxovid, a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Novavax, for emergency use. The company says that it has started work on developing an "Omicron-specific construct" of the antigen in its COVID-19 vaccine as part of a two-pronged strategy to curb the spread of the new coronavirus variant.

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US Democratic Senators to Unveil New Russia Sanctions Bill on Wednesday – Reports (Adds background in paras 8-10)

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US Democratic senators will present a new Russia sanctions bill later on Wednesday that would bring "severe costs" to the Russian economy in the event of an invasion of Ukraine, in an effort backed by the White House, The Washington Post reported.

The effort is led by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez.

The measure comes as the Biden administration tries to prevent Democrat defection in support of a Republican-led bill targeting Russia's Nord Stream 2, an effort the White House says may undermine its reengagement with Europe.

Menendez's legislation would entail sweeping sanctions on top Russian military brass and government officials, including President Vladimir Putin, as well as key banking institutions, the report said.

It would also hit companies in Russia that offer secure messaging systems such as SWIFT. Pledging more security assistance to Ukraine, the bill calls on the United States to "consider all available and appropriate measures" to ensure Nord Stream 2 is not put into operation.

The White House supports the bill, a spokesperson for the National Security Council told The Washington Post, noting that other measures, such as the one being pushed by Sen. Ted Cruz, will "not counter further Russian aggression or protect Ukraine."

"Instead, it will undermine our efforts to deter Russia and remove leverage the United States and our allies and partners possess in this moment all to score political points at home," the spokesperson said on the condition of anonymity. "And it would come at a moment where we need to be closely united with our European partners, including Germany. It makes no sense."

Cruz has long been trying to push through a bill that would force the US government to re-impose economic sanctions on the company building the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. In fall 2021, Cruz blocked the confirmation of nearly 60 ambassadors in a bid to secure a vote on his bill to sanction the pipeline. He lifted his block after Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer pledged that a vote on Cruz's bill would take place by January 14.

The White House is concerned that new sanctions on the Russian pipeline would undermine US relations with European partners, at a critical time when Washington is trying to de-escalate tensions in the region.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, completed in September, will deliver gas from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The process of certifying Nord Stream 2 AG as the pipeline's independent operator is currently underway to ensure the project complies with the conditions of the February 12, 2019 EU Gas Directive. German regulators are expected to decide on the certification in the second half of 2022.

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NATO Allies in Talks With Russia Remain Committed to Dual-Track Approach - US Mission

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - NATO allies reaffirmed their commitment to a dual-track approach of dialogue and deterrence during talks with Russia on security guarantees on Wednesday, the US mission to the alliance said.

"In talks with Russian counterparts, Allies stressed that NATO remains committed to our dual-track approach of dialogue and deterrence. We'll keep our defenses strong, standing united to deter further aggression against [Ukraine], while remaining open to meaningful dialogue & diplomacy," the mission said.

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US Democratic Senators to Unveil New Russia Sanctions Bill on Wednesday – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US Democratic senators will present a new Russia sanctions bill later on Wednesday that would bring "severe costs" to the Russian economy in the event of an invasion of Ukraine, in an effort backed by the White House, The Washington Post reported.

The effort is led by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez.

The measure comes as the Biden administration tries to suppress defections on a competing effort targeting Russia, which will be put to vote in the Senate this week, the report noted.

The legislation would entail sweeping sanctions on top Russian military brass and government officials, including President Vladimir Putin, as well as key banking institutions.

It would also hit companies in Russia that offer secure messaging systems such as SWIFT.

Pledging more security assistance to Ukraine, the bill calls on the United States to "consider all available and appropriate measures" to ensure Nord Stream 2 is not put into operation.

The White House supports the bill, a spokesperson for the National Security Council told The Washington Post, noting that other measures, such as the one being pushed by Senator Ted Cruz, will "not counter further Russian aggression or protect Ukraine."

"Instead, it will undermine our efforts to deter Russia and remove leverage the United States and our allies and partners possess in this moment all to score political points at home," the spokesperson said on the condition of anonymity. "And it would come at a moment where we need to be closely united with our European partners, including Germany. It makes no sense."

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US Approves Transfer of 5 Detainees From Gitmo Including Key al-Qaeda Figure - Reports
(Updates with details in paras 3-9)

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration approved the transfer of another five detainees held in Guantanamo Bay including Guled Hassan Duran, a key figure of the al-Qaeda terror group's (banned in Russia) branch in East Africa, The Washington Post reported.

The report said on Tuesday, citing attorneys, that the five detainees released from US custody are Duran, Moath al-Alwi, Suhail al-Sharabi, Zakaria al-Baidany and Abdulmalik Bajabu. None of the detainees have been charged with a crime.

The move comes as the prison turned 20 years old on Tuesday. President Joe Biden has been criticized by some human rights groups for not taking more action to close the facility.

To date, 18 of 39 detainees in Guantanamo Bay have been cleared by US national security officials for transfer out of the military prison in Cuba, the report said. The report noted that there is no date for when any of the 18 detainees cleared for transfer will leave.

Duran is a Somali national suspected of being a key member of al-Qaeda's branch in East Africa, the report said. Duran's attorneys claim he was kept at CIA black sites for two years, where he was deprived of sleep, food, water, medical care, and beaten, according to the report. Baidany is a Yemeni national the CIA suspected of having a key role in al-Qaeda's alleged plans to conduct bombing operations in Georgia and Chechnya, the report added. However, the report said US national security officials made their decision to transfer Baidany because there was no information indicating he had engaged in activities against the United States before he was captured.

US national security officials cleared Alwi, a Yemeni national, because of his lack of a leadership position in al-Qaeda or the Taliban (designated a terrorist group by the UN) and also due to his highly compliant behavior in recent years, the report said.

Bajabu is a Kenyan national who was accused of being a member of the East Africa al-Qaeda group, the report said. Bajabu was cleared after US national security officials determined he had a low level of training and lack of leadership role in his activities prior to being detained at Guantanamo Bay, the report said.

Sharabi is a Yemeni national who served as a body guard to former al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the report said. He served nearly 20 years in prison, but US government did not detail why he was approved for transfer, the report said.

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US Approves Transfer of 5 Detainees From Gitmo Including Key al-Qaeda Figure - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration approved the transfer of another five detainees held in Guantanamo Bay including Guled Hassan Duran, a key figure of the al-Qaeda terror group's (banned in Russia) branch in East Africa, The Washington Post reported.

The report said on Tuesday, citing attorneys, that the five detainees released from US custody are Duran, Moath al-Alwi, Suhail al-Sharabi, Zakaria al-Baidany and Abdulmalik Bajabu. None of the detainees have been charged with a crime.

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US Senators Introduce Bill to Sanction China Officials Obstructing COVID-19 Origins Probe

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Republican Senators Chuck Grassley and Marco Rubio introduced legislation that would sanction Chinese officials and organizations that play a role in preventing an independent investigation in China into the origins of the novel coronavirus.

"Today, Sen. Chuck Grassley joined Sen. Marco Rubio and several of his colleagues in introducing the Coronavirus Origin Validation, Investigation, and Determination (COVID) Act of 2022," Grassley's press office said in a news release on Tuesday. "The bill would authorize sanctions, if 90 days after enactment, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still refuses to allow a credible and comprehensive international investigation into the origins of COVID-19."

Grassley said in the release that an investigation is necessary to reveal whether the Chinese government is responsible for releasing the virus and covering it up.

The legislation would specifically target the leadership of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and its affiliated institutes and laboratories, including the Wuhan Institute of Virology. In addition, the bill would also suspend federal research funding across all academic fields for studies that involve CAS and prohibit gain-of-function virus research cooperation for any individual or institution based in the United States that receives federal funding.

On October 29, US intelligence released a declassified report on its investigation into the origins of the novel coronavirus, which found that the virus had not been developed as a biological weapon. However, the report also mentioned that that Beijing continued to hinder the global investigation, resisted sharing information and blamed other countries, including the United States.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry said that China had made clear its firm opposition when the US intelligence agency released the unclassified summary of assessment on the novel coronavirus origins in August. The Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that the report was a political and false one, with no scientific basis or credibility.

In spring 2021, the World Health Organization issued a full report on the coronavirus origin, stating that the leak from laboratory is unlikely.

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US House Panel Subpoenas Ex-White House Official, 2 Republican Strategists - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US House Select Committee investigating the events at the Capitol on January 6, said that it has subpoenaed two Republican strategists and a White House official who allegedly wrote the speech for former US President Donald Trump before the rally on that day.

"Chairman Bennie G. Thompson today announced that the Select Committee has issued subpoenas to three individuals as a part of its investigation into the January 6th attack on the US Capitol and its causes. The committee is demanding records and testimony from three witnesses involved in planning and preparations for the January 6th rally at the Ellipse, which

immediately preceded the violent attack on the Capitol," the Select Committee said in a press release on Tuesday.

The panel explained it believes Andy Surabian and Arthur Schwartz served as advisers for Donald Trump, Jr. and were in contact with an array of individuals, including the former US president as well as with Kimberly Guilfoyle regarding the rally on January 6, the release said. The panel also said it believes Ross Worthington is the person who drafted Trump's speech for the rally on January 6, the release added.

To date, the Select Committee has subpoenaed more than 40 individuals, who were allegedly involved in the riot at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, including Trump's close allies and advisers.

On that day, a group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol in a bid to protest the certifying of the 2020 presidential election results from several US states that Trump claimed were fraudulent and voter fraud that robbed him of election victory. The authorities shot one protester dead during the incident and charged more than 700 people for participating in the event.

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Biden Says Backs Change to Key Senate Rule to Pass Voting Reform Bills

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he supports changing key Senate rules in order to pass voting reform legislation put forward by Democrats.

Biden has been under fire to get a voting reform bill through Congress that would require eliminating a procedure called the filibuster, which allows a minority party to kill legislation. "[T]he United States Senate, designed to be the world's greatest deliberative body, has been rendered a shell of its former self," Biden said during a speech in the state of Georgia on Tuesday. "As an institutionalist, I believe that the threat to our democracy is so grave that we must find a way to pass these voting rights bills, debate them, vote. Let the majority prevail. And if that bare minimum is blocked, we have no option but to change the Senate rules, including getting rid of the filibuster for this."

Biden further said changing the Senate rules is necessary to protect Democracy and prevent a minority of senators from blocking action in voting rights, including allowing voting rights bills to pass by a simple majority instead of a 60-vote threshold.

The president said the filibuster rule was used 154 times last year, adding that it has been weaponized and abused.

Biden was in Georgia as well to lobby in support of the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would counter some state-level legislation passed last year to restrict mail-in voting and give more power to elected officials over counting ballots. US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said earlier this month the Senate will vote to change its filibuster rules by January 17 in order to secure the passage of new voting rights legislation.

Republicans have criticized the proposed bills as an attempt by Democrats to federalize elections in the United States and significantly ensure their chances to win elections.

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US COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign Prevented 240,000 Deaths in First Half of 2021 - Research

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The vaccination campaign against the novel coronavirus in the first half of 2021 saved estimated 240,000 lives and prevented 1.1 million hospitalizations caused by the virus' Alpha variant, according to new research published in the journal JAMA Network Open.

The research found that the massive vaccination campaign between December 12, 2020 and June 30, 2021 saved an estimated 240,797 lives and prevented an estimated 1,133,617 deaths as well as averted about 14 million cases of infection.

On Monday, the seven-day moving average of new cases in the United States reached 751,000 with about 146,000 of them hospitalized, according to data compiled by the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the United States has reported 837,274 deaths with and from COVID-19, according to CDC data. CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said on Monday that the persons who died had on average four comorbidities.

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Biden Quietly Approves \$200Mln Security Aid for Ukraine Under Emergency Powers - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has quietly approved a new \$200 million security aid package for Ukraine under emergency powers that allow the United States to send additional support to foreign countries in response to unforeseen military emergencies, Politico reported citing multiple sources.

On Monday, CNN first reported that the Biden administration quietly approved a new \$200 million security package for Ukraine in late December.

Politico reported on Tuesday that multiple congressional staffers found out about Biden used a so-called drawdown authorization during a classified briefing.

The drawdown authority allows the US president to direct the Secretary of State to ask the Defense Secretary to deliver equipment from existing Pentagon stock to a foreign country facing a military emergency.

None of the military equipment, which includes a radar system and maritime systems, approved for delivery in the \$200 million security package has arrived in Ukraine yet, the report said.

The US military is wary of seeing its equipment being sent to Eastern Europe, the report also said, citing a source familiar with the matter.

Western countries have accused Russia of allegedly deploying thousands of troops near the Ukrainian border in preparation for an invasion. Russia has repeatedly denied the accusations, saying it reserves the right to move troops within its sovereign territory, and pointing out it considers NATO's activities a threat to its national security.

Following the US-Russia security talks on Monday, the Russia-NATO Council are scheduled to meet in Brussels on Wednesday.

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Ukraine Foreign Minister Says Spoke With US Counterpart Amid Diplomatic Talks With Russia

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said he spoke with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken regarding the security talks with Russia in Geneva and Brussels.

"Spoke today with my American counterpart and friend, Secretary Blinken. Amid the week of diplomatic contacts with Russia, Ukraine and the US remain united in seeking de-escalation through diplomacy and strength. We keep working closely together to deter further Russian aggression," Kuleba said via Twitter on Tuesday.

The two officials also discussed the next steps to be undertaken when the US bilateral meeting on security with Russia and NATO-Russia Council meeting conclude this week, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

Blinken shared with Kuleba his expectations for the upcoming OSCE meeting and reiterated that the United States is ready to increase defensive assistance to Ukraine should Russia invade the country, the release said.

A meeting of the Russia-NATO Council will take place in Brussels on Wednesday, and a meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council will be held in Vienna the following day.

Russia proposed draft agreements on security guarantees for NATO and the United States in late 2021. Moscow requested guarantees that NATO do not expand eastward as such moves represent a national security threat to Russia. Moscow also suggested that the alliance should not admit Ukraine and form military bases in post-Soviet countries.

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US Deputy Secretary Sherman Briefs EU on Strategic Talks With Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman briefed EU ambassadors on Russia's buildup of forces near Ukraine and the recent US-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met with ambassadors from the EU's Political and Security Committee today in Brussels to discuss Russia's unprovoked military build-up along Ukraine's border and to provide a readout of the US-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue, which was held yesterday in Geneva," Price said on Tuesday.

The meeting underscored the US commitment to working closely with the EU to address this urgent challenge together, Price also said. Both the US and EU representatives affirmed their unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity during the meeting, Price added.

Sherman also thanked the EU committee for their work to ensure that any further Russian military incursion into Ukraine would result in severe costs for Russia, Price said.

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US Stocks Jump Tuesday as Investors Overcame Rate Hike Fears, Big Tech Up Most in 3 Weeks

NEW YORK, January 11 (Sputnik) - US stocks jumped on Tuesday, with Big Tech shares rising the most in three weeks, after Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell's assurance that the central bank will use moderate but extended approaches to defeat inflation that tamed investors fears of excessive interest rate hikes.

"After Powell's testimony, some investors feel they got the all-clear signal to buy the dip," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "Investors are still very optimistic about three key things: Household and corporate balance sheets remain very healthy, the upcoming earnings season should be strong, and the economy will still see above trend growth even if the Fed raises rates three times and begins the balance sheet runoff in the summer."

The Nasdaq Composite index, which groups highly-valued tech stocks such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google and Netflix, closed up 211 points, or 1.4%, at 15,153 for its biggest daily advance since the week before Christmas.

The Big Tech indicator on Wall Street fell 4.5% last week, suffering its biggest weekly plunge in 11 months on fears that the Fed will raise rates indiscriminately to battle inflation growing at its fastest pace in 40 years.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, rose almost 44 points, or 1%, to settle at 4,714.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which groups blue chips of mostly industrial stocks, gained 183 points, or 0.5%, to finish the session at 36,252.

The Federal Reserve chief said members of the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee were unanimous in wanting an interest rate hike this year though were undecided on the timing and frequency of the increases.

"Broadly, speaking, all members of the committee see interest rate increases coming this year. The median was three," Powell said.

Fitch Ratings, in a forecast released on Tuesday, predicted that the Federal Reserve will raise interest rates twice in 2022 and additional four times next year.

The economy shrank by 3.5% in 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic measures. The Federal Reserve projected a 5.5% growth for 2021 and 4% for 2022.

The Federal Reserve's central problem is inflation, which is running at four-decade highs as prices have soared from the lows of the pandemic due to higher wage demands and supply chain disruptions. Economists expect the first pandemic-era rate hike to fall between March and June as the central bank moves to dampen price pressures.

Powell's remarks came ahead of Wednesday's scheduled release of the US Consumer Price Index, or CPI, reading for December. Expectations are high that the latest CPI print will show another spike after a 6.8% jump in the year to November, the highest US inflation reading in 40 years.

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US Welcomes Reports of Calm in Almaty, CSTO Peacekeeping Mission Completion - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes the reports of calm in Almaty and the announcement of Kazakhstan President Kassym Tokayev that the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) peacekeeping forces have completed their mission in the country, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"We do welcome the reports of calm in the city of Almaty that we've heard in recent hours and over the course of the last day. We also welcome President Tokaev's announcement that the CSTO collective peacekeeping forces have completed their mission," Price said during a press briefing on Tuesday.

Until CSTO forces are withdrawn, the United States will continue to call upon all forces to respect human rights and uphold their commitment to promptly depart Kazakhstan as the government has requested, Price also said.

The CSTO peacekeeping contingent that arrived in Kazakhstan consists of Russian, Belarusian and Armenian troops.

With Kazakhstan's constitutional institutions in place, the United States is hopeful the situation there can be resolved peacefully, Price added.

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Omicron to Ultimately Find Just About Everybody Regardless of Vaccination Status - Fauci

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus Omicron variant will get to everyone regardless of their vaccination status, White House chief medical adviser Dr. Anthony Fauci said during a virtual talk organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"I think in many respects, Omicron, within this extraordinary, unprecedented degree of efficiency of transmissibility, will ultimately find just about everybody, those who have been vaccinated, unvaccinated and boosted," Fauci said on Tuesday.

Although Omicron is less severe than the Delta variant, unvaccinated people will get the brunt of the coronavirus leading to hospitalization or death, Fauci claimed.

Fauci pointed out that there is no way the coronavirus will be fully eradicated as it was in the case with smallpox.

Health experts have said the Omicron produces mild cases and no deaths have been reported since it was first detected in South Africa in November.

On Monday, the seven-day moving average of new cases in the United States reached 751,000 with about 146,000 of them hospitalized, according to data compiled by the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik)

US-RUSSIA SECURITY TALKS

* The United States wants to engage with Russia in non-public talks and there is no feeling that the two countries are moving toward a failure, US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan said on Tuesday.

* The three sets of meetings scheduled with Russia this week will share common themes of risk reduction and arms control, US NATO Representative Julianne Smith said.

* Moscow expects Washington to promptly respond to its security proposals, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* After the completion of the next two rounds of consultations on security guarantees, there will be clarity on the next round of talks between Russia and the United States, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

WORLD BANK REPORT ON GLOBAL ECONOMY

* Global growth is projected to slow through the next two years, decelerating from 5.5% in 2021 to 4.1% in 2022 and 3.2% in 2023 amid the spread of the coronavirus, inflation and debt, the World Bank's Global Economic Prospects report said on Tuesday.

* Economic growth in Europe and Central Asia will slow to 3% in 2022 and decline further to 2.9% in 2023, the World Bank said in the report.

* Russia's GDP growth is expected to flatten at 2.4% in 2022 and drop to 1.8% in 2023, the report said.

* The US economic forecast for 2022 has been revised downward to 3.7%, while the forecast of 2023 was adjusted slightly upward to 2.6%, the report said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Tuesday that he spoke with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in light of the security talks with Russia in Geneva and Brussels.

* The United States continues to assess Ukraine's security requirements despite providing it with military assistance throughout the past year amid the tensions with Russia, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN CONFLICT

* Two Armenian soldiers were killed on the border by shelling from the Azerbaijani side, the Armenian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.

* The Armenian Defense Ministry said that the Azerbaijani military used artillery and drones during shelling at the border.

* The Armenian Defense Ministry said that a soldier had been wounded on the border with Azerbaijan due to shelling.

* One Azerbaijani soldier was killed in a shootout at the border with Armenia, the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry said.

KAZAKHSTAN

* Several key ministers in Kazakhstan's new government have been appointed shortly after protests over fuel prices broke out in the country in early 2022, according to a decree released on Tuesday.

* Chevron's production facilities in Kazakhstan operate normally and the workplace environment in the country remains stable, a company spokesperson told Sputnik.

* After completing their tasks, the peacekeepers of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) will organize, in cooperation with Kazakhstan, the return of forces to their permanent deployment points, Col. Gen. Andrei Serdyukov, the commander of the CSTO collective peacekeeping forces, said.

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Russian Embassy Dismisses US Claims of 'Security Crisis' Caused by Moscow

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The US administration turns facts upside down when claiming that Russia is to blame for the current security crisis, the Russian Embassy in Washington said on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said that she briefed NATO allies on Monday's talks with Russia in Geneva. She reaffirmed Washington's commitment to work with partners "to urge de-escalation and respond to the security crisis caused by Russia." "Statement by Deputy Secretary of State about the 'security crisis caused by [Russia]' is in the good traditions of [US] administration. [US] officials often turn the facts upside down," the embassy wrote on Twitter.

"Such insinuations remind us of groundless accusations by ex-Defense Sec. Chuck Hagel who stated in 2014 'Russia – with its modern and capable army – [stands] on NATO's doorstep,'" it added.

On Monday, the Russian and American delegations led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov and Sherman, respectively, held closed consultations on Moscow's security proposals. Russia published its security suggestions for NATO and the US in late 2021. Moscow requested, in particular, guarantees that the alliance would no expand eastward.

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US Aviation Agency Says Briefly Halted Flights on West Coast Monday Night

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Tuesday that it briefly halted flights at some airports on the United States' West Coast and is currently reviewing the matter.

"As a matter of precaution, the FAA temporarily paused departures at some airports along the West Coast on Monday evening," an agency spokesperson said. "Full operations resumed in less than 15 minutes. The FAA regularly takes precautionary measures. We are reviewing the process around this ground stop as we do after all such events."

The FAA halted the flights around on Monday around the same time when North Korea test-fired a hypersonic missile toward the Sea of Japan. The launch came less than a week after North Korea conducted its first missile test in 2022.

On Tuesday, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said the launch did not pose an immediate threat to US personnel, territory, or to its allies, but added that North Korea's weapons program has a destabilizing impact.

"It violates multiple UN Security Council resolutions, it poses a threat to the DPRK's [North Korea] neighbors and the broader international community," Price said.

The State department spokesperson also said Washington continues to call on Pyongyang to refrain from further provocations and engage in substantive dialogue.

"We continue to believe that diplomacy is the best path forward, and we're going to continue to plot out that course with our allies... and we will be ready if the DPRK [North Korea] demonstrates that it is willing to engage," Price added.

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US Judge Sentences Neo-Nazi Group Leader to 7 Years for Targeting Reporters - Justice Dept

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - A federal judge sentenced a Neo-Nazi group leader in the US state of Washington to seven years in jail for plotting to threaten journalists along with cyberstalking, the Justice Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

"A Washington man was sentenced today to 84 months, or seven years, in prison for his role in a plot to threaten and intimidate journalists and advocates who worked to expose anti-Semitism," the release said.

Kaleb Cole, 25, the leader of the Neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division, was convicted on counts of interfering with a federally protected activity because of religion, mailing threatening communications, and cyberstalking, among others, the release added.

According to the Justice Department, Cole helped lead a violent nationwide neo-Nazi group, stockpiled weapons, and organized "hate camps."

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US Preparing SLS Super-Rocket for First Manned Artemis Space Mission - NASA

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US engineers and technicians at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida are preparing the Space Launch System (SLS), the largest rocket so far built, for its unmanned test launch and then its first manned lunar mission with a crew on board, NASA announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"As teams continue to prepare NASA's Space Launch System (SLS) rocket for its debut flight with the launch of Artemis I, NASA and its partners across the country have made great progress building the rocket for Artemis II, the first crewed Artemis mission," the release said. The team is also manufacturing and testing major parts for Artemis missions III, IV and V, NASA continued.

"The Space Launch System team is not just building one rocket but manufacturing several rockets for exploration missions and future SLS flights beyond the initial Artemis launch," NASA SLS program manager John Honeycutt said at the agency's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama.

With its two solid rocket boosters and four RS-25 engines, SLS produces more than 8.8 million pounds of thrust to launch each Artemis mission beyond Earth's orbit and onward to the Moon. The rocket features some of the largest, most advanced, and most reliable hardware elements ever built for space exploration, NASA said.

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Nuland Says Impossible for Single Round of Talks With Russia to Settle Issues This Intense

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - It is almost impossible for the United States and its NATO allies to resolve intense security issues with Russia in a single round of talks, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Tuesday.

"It is almost impossible for a single round with issues this intense to settle everything let alone sometimes anything, so we had to exchange positions, we had to understand each other and then we have to get down to the hard work," Nuland said in a press briefing regarding Monday's US-Russia security talks

Nuland mentioned that several issues of importance to the US-Russia relationship includes military transparencies, intermediate range missile placement, and arms control.

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Hong Kong Firm to Pay \$5.2Mln to US Gov't Over Iran Sanctions Violations - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - A Hong Kong trading and finance company has agreed to pay more than \$5.2 million to settle potential liability costs for violating US-mandated economic sanctions on Iran, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the Department of the Treasury announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"OFAC today announced a settlement with Sojitz (Hong Kong), a Hong Kong, China-based company that engages in offshore trading and cross-border trade financing," the release said.

"Sojitz HK agreed to remit \$5,228,298 to settle its potential civil liability for apparent violations of the Iranian Transactions and Sanctions Regulations (ITSR)."

The apparent violations occurred when Sojitz HK made US dollar payments through American financial institutions for Iranian-origin high density polyethylene resin (HDPE) from its bank in Hong Kong to the HDPE supplier's banks in Thailand, OFAC said.

"In doing so, Sojitz HK caused the U.S. financial institutions that processed the funds to engage in and facilitate prohibited financial transactions related to goods of Iranian origin," the release said.

The settlement amount reflected OFAC's determination that Sojitz HK's apparent violations were non-egregious and voluntarily self-disclosed, and accounted for Sojitz HK's remedial response and cooperation with OFAC, it added.

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Nuland Says Any Export Restrictions on Russia Will Have 'Painful Impact'

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Any financial measures and export restrictions that may be imposed on Moscow by the United States and its allies as a result of an invasion of Ukraine will have a painful impact on Russia, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Tuesday.

"We are very confident in the consultations that we've been having with our allies and partners. We've been working at this for some two and a half months at every level from the President on down. We have, as I discussed in very broad strokes and will only discuss them in broad strokes, a common understanding of the kind of intensive financial measures we'll need to take, and also now in the context of export restrictions that will have a painful impact on Russia," Nuland said.

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Nuland Says NATO Poses No Threat to Russia Unless Threatened

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Tuesday that NATO does not pose a threat to Russia unless the alliance is threatened.

"NATO poses no threat to Russia either unless of course Russia chose to pose a threat to NATO," Nuland said during a press briefing. "NATO is a defensive alliance whose sole purpose is to protect its members."

Nuland added that diplomacy is the best option to restore stability and security for Ukraine, Europe and Russia.

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UN Expresses 'Great Concern' at Alleged Military Use of Yemeni Civilian Ports

UNITED NATIONS, January 11 (Sputnik) - The UN Mission to support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA) expressed concern on Tuesday over the alleged use of Hudaydah ports for military purposes and requested an inspection.

"UNMHA notes with great concern the allegations of the militarization of the Hudaydah Ports," the mission said in a statement. "UNMHA has requested as part of its mandate to undertake an inspection and it stands ready to address concerns pertaining to any militarization of the ports." The mission reminded all parties in the conflict in Yemen that ports serve as a crucial lifeline for millions of Yemenis and called for resolving the matter with restraint and preserving the civilian nature of Hudaydah's ports.

Last week, Saudi-led coalition spokesman Col. Turki al-Malki said Houthi rebels were using the civilian ports of Hudaydah, As-Salif and Ras Isa in Yemen's west for warfare.

On January 3, the Arab coalition announced that the rebels had hijacked a ship sailing under the flag of the United Arab Emirates off the Yemeni coast in the southern Red Sea. The vessel was said to be carrying medical equipment.

The Houthis said the captured ship was transporting military equipment and entered Yemeni waters without a license, threatening the security of the Yemeni people.

Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces, led by President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, and the Houthi rebels. Since March 2015, the Saudi-led Arab alliance, working in cooperation with Hadi's forces, has been conducting air, land and sea operations against the Houthis. The conflict has escalated into one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world.

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US Oil Output to Reach Record Average of 12.4Mln Barrels in 2023 - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US oil production is expected to reach a record average of 12.4 million barrels per day (b/d) by 2023 as output catches up with the slowdown caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said on Tuesday.

"We expect US crude oil production to average 11.8 million b/d in 2022 and to rise to 12.4 million b/d in 2023, which would be the highest annual average US crude oil production on record," the EIA said in its monthly Short-Term Energy Outlook for January.

The all-time high for US crude production, in absolute monthly numbers and not average, was 13.1 million barrels in March 2020, just before the coronavirus pandemic measures destroyed demand for fuels.

In the year that followed, US crude production fell by a third to around 10 million barrels per day. The EIA said the monthly Short-Term Energy Outlook continues to reflect "heightened levels of uncertainty" due to the ongoing pandemic.

"In addition to macroeconomic uncertainties, uncertainty about winter weather and consumer energy demand also present a wide range of potential outcomes for energy consumption," it added.

The EIA also projected that crude shipped by the OPEC+ alliance of global oil producers will rise by 2.5 million from last year to average 28.8 million barrels per day this year and 28.9 million in 2023.

OPEC+ - which groups the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with 10 other oil producers steered by Russia - has slashed its crude exports since the pandemic measures decimated demand for fuels in April 2020.

The alliance began by cutting 10 million barrels daily from its 2019 export level of around 32 million barrels per day. It is still withholding about 4 million barrels of daily supply from the market.

From: Barani Krishnan - barani.krishnan@gmail.com

Subject: US Oil Output to Reach Record Average of 12.4Mln Barrels in 2023 - EIA

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Quebec Premier Says Will Make Unvaccinated Adults Pay 'Health Contribution' Tax

TORONTO, January 11 (Sputnik) - Adult residents in the Canada's province of Quebec who remain unvaccinated against the coronavirus in the coming weeks will have to pay a health contribution tax, Premier Francois Legault said on Tuesday.

"The vaccine is the key to fight the virus. This is why we're looking for a health contribution from adults who refuse to be vaccinated for non-medical reasons. Those who refuse to receive their first dose in the coming weeks will have to pay a new health contribution," Legault said.

On Monday, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advised Americans to avoid traveling to Canada due to the risk of contracting the coronavirus Omicron variant. The CDC advised travelers who must go to Canada to receive a full course of vaccinations before doing so.

However, health experts have said the Omicron variant produces mild cases and no deaths have so far been reported.

Quebec in late December re-imposed curfew, bans on public gatherings and other restrictive measures amid the new wave of coronavirus cases. Authorities are imposing fines of \$1,000 to \$6,000 on residents and visitors who break the curfew.

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Blinken, Dutch Foreign Minister Discuss 'Steadfast Support' for Ukraine - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed by telephone with the new Netherlands Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra what he called was the "steadfast support" for Ukraine against any potential Russian incursion, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Tuesday.

"The Secretary reiterated steadfast support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity in the face of potential further Russian aggression and stressed the US commitment to impose significant costs should Russia escalate actions against Ukraine," the Price said.

Blinken also rejected political pressure and economic coercion by China and highlighted the United States' solidarity with Lithuania, another NATO ally, Price said.

"Secretary Blinken emphasized the importance of the transatlantic bond to global security and prosperity. The Secretary also committed to further enhance the breadth and depth of the US-Netherlands relationship and look for additional areas of practical cooperation across the political, economic, and security dimensions," Price added.

Blinken congratulated Hoekstra on his appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the new Netherlands government, according to the readout.

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No Contact Made Between UN Chief, Kazakh President Since Start of Protests - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 11 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has still not spoken to Kazakhstan President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev amid the social and political unrest in the country, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"He has not," Dujarric said during a press briefing in response to a question whether Guterres had contacted Kazakhstan's president.

Dujarric added the United Nations has had contacts on various levels with Kazakh officials, including through its Special Representative for Central Asia Natalia Gherman and the Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the world body in New York.

Meanwhile, a group of UN human rights experts expressed concern about reports that Tokayev had ordered the security forces to respond with lethal force against what he called were terrorists.

"Misuse of the word "terrorism" undermines the security of all and cheapens this term which has a specific meaning in international law," the experts said in a statement issued earlier on Tuesday.

The experts noted this shows how misguided counter-terrorism measures can be abused by security forces that are unaccountable for actions justified by countering terrorism.

Protests swept across Kazakhstan last week following a sharp rise in gas prices. However the protests turned into riots and the authorities said foreign terrorists tried to hijack the situation to destabilize the country and bring about a violent change of government, Tokayev declared a nationwide state of emergency until January 19 and invited Collective Security Treaty Organization peacekeeping forces to help bring the situation under control.

The president also dismissed the government, appointed a new prime minister and reshuffled the cabinet on Tuesday.

Tokayev said despite the fact that professionals had worked to prepare for the seizure of power in Kazakhstan by violent means, the attempted coup failed.

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UN Unable to Verify Reports of Airstrikes in Tigray, Reduces Movements in Area - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 11 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is unable to confirm reports of another airstrike in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region and decided to reduce its staff's movements in the area after a strike last week that killed more than 50 people, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"Our humanitarian colleagues are telling us that they are aware of media reports of airstrikes in Tigray's Northwest zone that took place yesterday and that led to several civilian casualties, reportedly," Dujarric said. "However, we have not been able to confirm these reports, nor the number of casualties due to lack of communications in the area."

The reports come days after on Friday an airstrike killed 56 people in a camp for internally displaced people in Tigray, forcing aid workers to limit its movements in the embattled region.

"We, along with our humanitarian partners, have reduced movements in the Northwest zone of Tigray following the airstrikes," Dujarric said.

The spokesman also said UN personnel working in Tigray's capital city of Mekelle reported anti aircraft fire earlier on Tuesday, but there has been no indication of bombardment of the city yet. Ethiopia has been mired in an internal conflict since November 2020, when the central government accused the Tigray People's Liberation Front of attacking a military base, and launched a counter-operation in the northern Tigray region.

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US Continues to Assess Ukraine Security Needs Amid Tensions With Russia - NATO Envoy

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to assess Ukraine's security requirements despite providing it with military assistance throughout the past year amid the tensions with Russia, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Tuesday. "The United States has been offering security assistance to Ukraine throughout the last year, and we have continued to assess the security needs of our friends in Kiev to better understand, what their requirements are," Smith said during a press briefing. Smith added that she took part in a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council on Monday and reiterated that the United States continues to support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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Chevron Production Facilities in Kazakhstan Operating at Normal Rates - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – Chevron's production facilities in Kazakhstan operating normally and the workplace environment in the country remains stable, a spokesperson for the company told Sputnik on Tuesday. "Tengizchevroil (TCO) continues to focus on ensuring the health and safety of its workforce. The workplace environment is stable at Tengiz, and production facilities are operating at normal rates," the spokesperson said.

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NATO Not Going to Return to 1997 When Alliance Was Smaller - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - NATO member states are not interested in going back in time to 1997 when the alliance was smaller than it is today, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Tuesday.

On Monday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said that NATO should return to its state in 1997 before the Eastern European countries became members of the alliance and also abandon the "development of the territory" of those states that joined the alliance after this point.

"This alliance is not going to be rolling back time and returning to a completely different era where we had a very different alliance that was smaller, and a very different footprint. I think we're operating in today's world with NATO as it stands today, and I don't think anyone inside the NATO alliance is interested in going back in time to revisit an era where NATO looked a lot different than it does today," Smith said during a press briefing.

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US NATO Envoy Says Series of Russia Engagements Focused on Risk Reduction, Arms Control

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The three sets of meetings scheduled with Russia this week will share common themes of risk reduction and arms control, US NATO Representative Julianne Smith said on Tuesday.

"I think there are some common themes to the three engagements ... We're focused on transparency, we're focused on risk reduction, the theme of arms control runs through all three engagements," Smith said during a press briefing leading up to a NATO-Russia Council meeting on Wednesday.

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Global Oil Price Benchmark Brent to Average \$75 in 2022, Up \$4 From Last Year - EIA

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Global crude oil prices, as indicated by the London-traded benchmark Brent, are expected to average \$75 per barrel this year, up \$4 from 2021 levels, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said on Tuesday.

"Brent crude oil spot prices averaged \$71 per barrel in 2021, and we forecast Brent prices will average \$75/b in 2022," the EIA said in its monthly Short-Term Energy Outlook for January. It, however, lowered that forecast to \$68 for 2023.

Brent hovered near a two-month high at just under \$84 a barrel in Tuesday's trade, rallying almost 4% on the day on tight supply concerns and also in response to the EIA forecast.

Since the start of the year, Brent has risen almost 8%, after gaining 51% for all of 2021.

Brent aside, the EIA forecast that US crude's West Texas Intermediate (WTI) benchmark will rise from last year's average of \$68.21 per barrel to \$71.32 this year, before climbing back down to \$63.50 in 2023.

The rally in oil comes on the back of production cuts by global producers responding to the demand destruction for fuels seen at the height of the coronavirus pandemic that sent WTI to a historic negative pricing of minus \$40 per barrel in April 2020 and Brent to below \$16. Oil producers under the OPEC+ alliance are still withholding some four million barrels of daily supply from the market from some 10 million barrels of cuts they began with in May 2020.

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NATO Committed to Meaningful, Reciprocal Dialogue With Russia - US Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The NATO alliance is committed to engaging in meaningful and reciprocal dialogue with Russia to address security concerns in Eastern Europe, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Tuesday.

"NATO is open and committed to a meaningful, reciprocal dialogue with Russia," Smith said during a telephone briefing previewing Wednesday's NATO-Russia security talks.

No NATO allies are currently feeling particularly optimistic or pessimistic about the upcoming meeting, Smith added.

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NATO Stands Firm on Russia's Security Proposals 'That Are Simply Non-Starters' - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - NATO stands united on pushing back against Russia's security proposals that are considered to be non-starters, including the one on limiting the alliance's open door policy, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Tuesday.

"We stand firm on pushing back on security proposals that are simply non-starters, we will not allow anyone to slam NATO's open door policy shut," Smith said during a telephone briefing previewing Wednesday's NATO- Russia security talks.

On Monday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Russia needs firm legally-binding guarantees that Ukraine and Georgia will never become members of NATO. Ryabkov emphasized that this issue is a matter of Russia's national security.

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Biden Following Closely Talks With Russia, Receives Briefings Daily – White House

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden is following closely the ongoing talks with Russia in Europe and receives briefings from his national security team daily, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"Pretty closely. He receives nearly daily, if not daily, updates from his national security team on how the conversations are going, what the talks look like and what the status of those conversations is," Psaki told reporters when asked about how closely Biden is following the security talks.

She declined to reveal whether the US and Russia are discussing the possibility of another phone call between their leaders.

"I think we are going to assess where we are after we get the next two rounds of talks," she said.

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US to See More Rate Hikes Over Time If Inflation Remains Above Forecasts - Fed Chair

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The United States will likely have more interest rates over time if inflation continues to exceed forecasts, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said Tuesday as the central bank prepares for its first rate hike since the COVID-19 pandemic that upended the economy two years ago.

"The economy no longer requires extremely accommodative policy," Powell told a Senate hearing held to confirm the extension of his term until 2024 by President Joe Biden. The Fed chair said the members of the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC, were unanimous in wanting a rate hike this year though the timing and frequency was undecided. "Broadly speaking, all members of the committee see interest rate increases coming this year. The median was three."

Fitch Ratings, in a forecast released Tuesday, predicted that the Fed will raise rates twice this year and another four times next year.

Powell declined to commit to any hard number on this beyond the Fed's projections "The committee hasn't made any decision on timing of rate hike. We must be humble and nimble," he said, referring to unsteady labor market gains despite reaching the Fed's target for "maximum employment," with a jobless rate of 3.9% in December. "If inflation continues to be higher than forecast, we will have to raise interest rates more over time."

But while inflationary pressures are expected to persist until the middle of this year, "we are most likely to remain in an era of very low interest rates," Powell added.

The economy shrank by 3.5% in 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic. The Fed has projected a 5.5% growth for 2021 and 4% for 2022.

The Fed's problem though is inflation, which is running at four-decade highs as prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic due to higher wage demands and supply chain disruptions. Economists expect the first pandemic-era rate hike to fall between March and June as the central bank moves to dampen price pressures.

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US Aviation Agency Says Briefly Halted Flights on West Coast Monday Night

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Tuesday that it briefly halted flights at some airports on the United States' West Coast and is currently reviewing the matter.

"As a matter of precaution, the FAA temporarily paused departures at some airports along the West Coast on Monday evening," an agency spokesperson said. "Full operations resumed in less than 15 minutes. The FAA regularly takes precautionary measures. We are reviewing the process around this ground stop as we do after all such events."

Flights were halted around the same time North Korea test fired a hypersonic missile.

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UN Chief 'Very Concerned' by N. Korea's Launch, Urges Country to Resume Talks - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 11 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is "very concerned" about another ballistic missile launch by North Korea and calls on the country's leadership to comply with its international obligations and return to talks with the other concerned parties, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"We've obviously seen this launch. The Secretary-General is very concerned by this latest development and reiterates his call on the leadership in the DPRK [North Korea] to comply fully with its international obligations, all relevant Security Council resolutions and resume talks with the other parties concerned about the situation on the Korean peninsula," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The UN spokesperson emphasized that the only way to reach sustainable peace and complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is through diplomatic engagement.

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January 6 Events Posed Challenges to US World Status as Democracy - DOJ

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The breach of the US Capitol by demonstrators on January 6, 2020 posed challenges for the country in terms of its status as a democracy among foreign leaders, top Justice Department national security official Matthew Olsen said on Tuesday.

"I would certainly say that what happened on January 6 has posed challenges in terms of our status as a democracy, if you look across the country. I've had that conversation with foreign leaders in the national security space," Olsen said during congressional testimony.

However, the way in which the United States has responded to and addressed domestic terrorism stands as an example to the rest of the world, the official added.

Olsen announced earlier in his remarks to the Senate Judiciary Committee that the Justice Department established a dedicated domestic terrorism unit to handle and coordinate such cases across the US.

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US Continues to Have Concerns About Terror Groups Operating in Afghanistan - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to have serious concerns about international terror groups in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal from that country, Assistant US Attorney General Matthew Olsen said in a congressional testimony on Tuesday. "From my vantage point, international terrorism remains a priority... We continue to have concerns about both ISIS [Islamic State] and al-Qaeda [in Afghanistan]," Olsen told the US Senate Judiciary Committee about potential additional national security threats caused by the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

In December, the Afghanistan Ambassador to Tajikistan Muhammad Zahir Agbar told Sputnik that the Taliban (under UN sanctions over terrorist activities) grants al-Qaeda and Islamic State fighters Afghan passports. The practice is a signal that terrorism is being legalized there, the ambassador said.

The terrorist threat to the US homeland from externally-directed attacks is at its lowest since September 11, 2001, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism Milancy Harris told the US House of Representatives in December. However, the United States still faces a number of terrorist groups committed to targeting its interests and personnel abroad, Harris added.

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NASA Chief Says Will Not Visit Russia for Talks on Cooperation Until Pandemic Subsides

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said on Tuesday that he will not visit Russia for his next round of in-person talks with Roscosmos head Dmitry Rogozin until the global COVID-19 pandemic subsides, but climate cooperation will be a major item on the agenda when they do meet.

"As to when that trip will occur, I am simply at the mercy of COVID," Nelson told a podcast press conference. "Until we see a subsiding of this pandemic, I am not going to be able to go. I am looking forward to meeting Dmitry and in the meantime we will continue to talk as frequently as we need to."

Cooperation on space-based studies on changes in the world's climate will be a "high agenda" item that will certainly be discussed between the two space agency chiefs, Nelson said. "Climate will be an issue when I visit with Dmitry Rogozin: It will certainly be. It is one of the high agenda items for the entire US government," Nelson said. NASA and its array of earth-monitoring satellites in orbit remained "at the top of the spear" of US government research on climate change, Nelson added.

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UPDATE - Documents Show Fauci May Have Concealed Info on COVID Lab Origins - House Republicans

(Adds background in paras 6-8)

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - Newly released documents reveal White House chief medical advisor Dr. Anthony Fauci may have concealed information on COVID's laboratory origins, two Republican congressmen wrote in a letter to Secretary for Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra on Tuesday.

"We've released never before seen emails showing Dr. Fauci may have concealed information about #COVID19 originating from the Wuhan lab and intentionally downplayed the lab leak theory," Representatives James Comer and Jim Jordan said in a Twitter message. "[We] want Fauci under oath. Time for answers."

Excerpts from the emails revealed that Dr. Fauci was warned of two things: the potential that the COVID-19 virus leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the possibility that the virus was intentionally genetically manipulated, Comer and Jordan wrote in their letter.

"It is imperative that we investigate if this information was conveyed to the rest of the government and whether the information would have changed the US response to the pandemic," the congressmen wrote.

Comer and Jordan formally requested an on-the-record, transcribed interview with Fauci to discuss the information.

Having sent a fact-finding mission to Wuhan last year, the World Health Organization concluded that a lab leak was "extremely unlikely." WHO experts said that the virus was transmitted to humans from animals that may have consumed bats.

In October, US intelligence released a declassified report on the origins of COVID-19, concluding that the virus had not been developed as a biological weapon. The intelligence community remains divided on the most likely origin of the virus.

China itself has repeatedly denied the lab leak theories.

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US Envoy to NATO Says Not Much Compromise With Russia on Alliance's Expansion Eastward

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Tuesday that there is not much room for compromise with Russia on the issue of the military alliance's expansion.

"Frankly, I don't see a lot of compromise," Smith said in an interview with CNN regarding Russia's concerns about NATO's further expansion into Eastern Europe.

On Monday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Russia needs firm legally-binding guarantees that Ukraine and Georgia will never become members of NATO. He added that this issue is a matter of Russia's national security.

Smith said there is currently no option on the table to halt the expansion of NATO and the door remains open for other countries to join. Any decision about membership is for the alliance and the country in question to decide, she added.

Talks among NATO representatives, member states and Russian officials will take place in Brussels on Wednesday to address Moscow's concerns about the alliance's expansion eastward and the alleged threat that Russia may invade Ukraine.

Smith said all the parties are currently "committed to dialogue" to resolve their issues. She said Wednesday's meeting is expected to address the ongoing talks about placing some reciprocal limits on military exercises and missile placements in Eastern Europe.

On Monday, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman led a US delegation in Geneva at the meeting with their Russian counterparts to discuss the pressing issues at hand, including US missile placements in Europe.

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American Red Cross Says Facing First National Blood Crisis in US Amid Omicron Surge

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The American Red Cross said on Tuesday that it is experiencing a blood supply crisis in the United States amid a surge of the Omicron coronavirus variant.

"The American Red Cross is facing a national blood crisis – its worst blood shortage in over a decade, posing a concerning risk to patient care. Amid this crisis, doctors have been forced to make difficult decisions about who receives blood transfusions and who will need to wait until more products become available. Blood and platelet donations are critically needed to help prevent further delays in vital medical treatments," the organization said.

According to Dr. Pampee Young, chief medical officer of the Red Cross, some types of medical care cannot wait.

"Hospitals are still seeing accident victims, cancer patients, those with blood disorders like sickle cell disease, and individuals who are seriously ill who all need blood transfusions to live even as Omicron cases surge across the country. We're doing everything we can to increase blood donations to ensure every patient can receive medical treatments without delay, but we cannot do it without more donors. We need the help of the American people," she explained.

The crisis comes as the United States reported 1.34 million daily COVID-19 cases on Monday, according to an NBC News tally. Health officials say that 95% of new cases are related to the Omicron variant, which is said to be more contagious but less severe.

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Hysteria About Russian Firm's Alleged Presence in Mali Reveals Double Standards - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, January 11 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday that the Western countries' hysteria regarding the alleged presence of a Russian security company in Mali is another manifestation of double standards and an indication that the market for such services is monopolized by the West.

"The hysteria around the Russian company is yet another manifestation of double standards," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council on the situation in Mali. "It is clear that the market for such services is monopolized by Western countries."

Earlier on Tuesday, a senior official from the French Ministry of Armed Forces said Russia had deployed between 300 and 400 mercenaries in central Mali.

Russian Foreign Ministry Africa Department Director Vsevolod Tkachenko told Sputnik that France's statement on the possible cooperation between the Malian authorities and a private Russian security company is not constructive and is a reaction to something that does not yet exist.

Russia has repeatedly denied the Western countries' allegations of being militarily present in various African countries. The Kremlin has specifically addressed the claim regarding Mali, saying there are no representatives of the Russian armed forces in that country.

The spokesperson for the Russian President, Dmitry Peskov, said Moscow maintains contacts, including through the military, with many countries and some of them in Africa, but the Russian authorities have nothing to do with the work of private security companies.

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No Request at UNSC Yet to Discuss North Korea's Missile Launch - President

UNITED NATIONS, January 11 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council has not yet received a request to discuss the latest missile launch by North Korea, the second in one week, but is concerned by the development, the council's President, Norwegian Ambassador to the United Nations Mona Juul said on Tuesday.

North Korea launched a missile, apparently a ballistic one, at around 22:27 GMT on Monday from inland toward the Sea of Japan. American and South Korean intelligence agencies are now thoroughly analyzing the data. The latest launch came less than a week after North Korea conducted its first missile test this year.

On Monday, hours before the second launch, the UN Security Council gathered for closed consultations to discuss the January 5 test.

"We will see whether there will be a new request or whether we will request a meeting on this issue," Juul told reporters. "It is really extremely concerning that the DPRK [North Korea] continues with missile launches."

Juul said the Security Council needs to gather more information on the most recent launch. The diplomat noted that the council still has not gotten any request to address another pressing issue – the question of human rights during mass protests in Kazakhstan.

"We [Norway] have from our side expressed really grave concern about the situation... And the fact that [there have been] so many civilian casualties is really very tragic," Juul stated.

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FBI, CISA Urge Conducting Proactive Threat Hunting Against Russian Hackers - Advisory
WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the National Security Agency (NSA) on Tuesday issued a joint advisory urging the cybersecurity community to conduct a proactive threat hunting against alleged Russian state-linked hackers.

"CISA, the FBI and NSA encourage the cybersecurity community - especially critical infrastructure network defenders - to adopt a heightened state of awareness, conduct proactive threat hunting, and implement the mitigations identified in the joint CSA [cybersecurity advisory]," the statement said.

The advisory provides an overview of the alleged Russian cyber operations, actions, incident response guidance and mitigation and CISA recommends network defenders to review the agency's Russia Cyber Threat Overview and Advisories page for more information on malicious cyber activity.

"CISA recommends critical infrastructure leaders review CISA Insights: Preparing For and Mitigating Potential Cyber Threats for steps to proactively strengthen their organization's operational resiliency against sophisticated threat actors, including nation-states and their proxies," the statement added.

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US Justice Department Establishes Domestic Terrorism Unit - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 11 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice has established a domestic terrorism unit to focus on casework related to domestic terror threats, Assistant Attorney General for the DOJ National Security Division Matthew Olsen said on Tuesday. "In addition, I have decided to establish a domestic terrorism unit to augment our existing approach. This group of dedicated attorneys will focus on the domestic terrorism threat, helping

to ensure that these cases are handled properly and effectively coordinated across the Department of Justice and across the country," Olsen said during congressional testimony.