

01/21/21 Thursday

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Austria Reveals National Anti-Semitism Strategy
by [Mary F.](#)

The number of antisemitic cases in the country grew significantly in 2019, which Austrian researchers attribute in part to the increase in right-wing extremism.

The Austrian government on Thursday revealed a sweeping national strategy to combat anti-Semitism in the country through protections for the Jewish community and more stringent punishments for hate crimes, [AP News](#) reported.

The national strategy will include items like protecting synagogues and enhancing education about Judaism, the outlet reported.

Oskar Deutsch, president of the Jewish Community of Vienna, [commented](#) on the Austrian government's new strategy, noting that "Jews are always the first ones who are affected" by discrimination.

In 2019, there were 550 anti-Semitic incidents in Austria, according to a [joint report](#) by the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien (IKG) and the Forum Against Antisemitism.

"That is twice as much as five years ago," Karoline Edtstadler, who is serving as the minister for the EU and the constitution at the Austrian Chancellery in the government of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz told AP, commenting on the report's findings.

According to the report, an increase in right-wing extremism has contributed to the rise in antisemitic incidents.

"The resurgence of antisemitic incidents manifested itself a number of ways, with the primary method of attack being property damage. The climate of right-wing extremism in both Austria and across the continent has been fundamental in spurring these incidents, the report found," the report explained.

"Austria is not an island. The increase in antisemitic incidents can, unfortunately, be observed across Europe," IKG President Oskar Deutsch also [told](#) the Austrian Press Agency at the time.

"The fight against antisemitism is not a Jewish task alone, but rather a task for society as a whole. The findings of 2019 show us that the time to act has really come."

Most recently in August 2020, an assailant attacked Elie Rosen, a Jewish community leader in the southern city of Graz, with a wooden club, [Reuters reported](#) at the time, prompting Kurz and other top officials to condemn the attack.

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Biden Instructs Intelligence Agencies to Study Reports of 'Russian Hackers', US Soldier Bounties
by [Asya Geydarova](#), [Mary F.](#)

The inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden took place on January 20 and marks the start of the four-year term of Biden as the 46th president of the United States and Kamala Harris as vice president. Since being inaugurated, Biden has already signed a series of executive orders to undo US President Donald Trump's legacy.

White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters that President Joe Biden has tasked the US intelligence agencies with preparing a thorough review of alleged activities undertaken by Russia.

According to Psaki, these include reports of "Russian hackers" concerning the recent cyber attack against IT company SolarWinds, the alleged poisoning of opposition figure and blogger Alexey Navalny, and allegations of bounties on the US soldiers in Afghanistan.

"Even as we work with Russia to advance US interests, so we work to hold Russia to account for its reckless and adversarial actions. And to this end, the president is also issuing a tasking to the intelligence community for its full assessment of the SolarWinds cyber beach, Russian interference in the 2020 election, its use of chemical weapons against opposition leader Alexey Navalny and the alleged bounties on the US soldiers in Afghanistan," Psaki said.

The cyberattack against SolarWinds exposed private data from companies and government agencies, including thousands of emails from the US Department of Justice (DoJ).

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik the United States is using the media to spread different versions of what caused the SolarWinds cyberattack, but it never showed any proof that Russia was complicit in it.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has also denied the allegations: "This talk [of cyberattacks] has nothing to do with us, because Russia is not involved in such attacks generally, including this one specifically. We state this officially and decisively. Any accusations of Russia's involvement are absolutely unfounded and are a continuation of the kind of blind Russophobia that is resorted to following any incident," Peskov said in a briefing last month, [Sputnik reported](#).

Bounties Allegations

In June, [the New York Times newspaper reported](#) that US intelligence officials had informed President Donald Trump about suspected Russia effort to place bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan. Trump dismissed the claims as a "hoax" and several senior US military officials said that the intelligence was unconvincing. Russian officials, in turn, have issued multiple denials of the claims, calling them "blatant lies" designed to keep US forces in Afghanistan forever.

US media outlets reported in late December that the president was also briefed of alleged findings that China offered bounties to non-state actors in Afghanistan.

A senior US official told the Politico portal that the allegations lacked "hard evidence," and Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said that the claims were "nothing but fake news" published with the aim of smearing China. The Taliban has called the bounty allegations "propaganda," suggesting they may have been put forward for political reasons.

"Of course, countries are competing among themselves. It is possible that accusations against Russia of such cooperation are also for political purposes and so China has been accused of doing the same thing," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said last week.

Navalny Case

Navalny returned to Russia on Sunday after receiving treatment in Germany following suspected poisoning. He was detained at a Moscow airport over multiple violations of probation. On 20 August, Navalny fell ill while aboard a domestic flight. He was initially treated in the Siberian city of Omsk, where the plane had to urgently land. Local doctors suggested metabolic malfunctions as main diagnosis and said there were no traces of poison in his system. Two days later, he was flown to the Charite hospital in Berlin for further treatment.

Berlin claims that German doctors found evidence of poisoning with a nerve agent from the Novichok group in Navalny's body, which is refuted by Moscow. Navalny returned to Russia on Sunday after receiving treatment in Germany following a suspected poisoning in Siberia.

Navalny was detained at a Moscow airport upon arrival over multiple violations of probation. Moscow insists that Berlin present the biological materials to corroborate the chemical poisoning, so that it could open a criminal case. According to Russian authorities, they have already sent several requests for legal assistance to Berlin, [but to no avail](#).

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Mike Pompeo Hints at 2024 Presidential Run in Cryptic Tweet
by [Mary F.](#)

Mike Pompeo is an American politician and attorney who served as the 70th US Secretary of State from 2018 to 2021 under the leadership of Donald Trump. Pompeo also served as the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency from 2017 to 2018.

It seems as though former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is not wasting any time generating speculation that he has ambitions to perhaps run for president. On Pompeo's first day as a private citizen, he tweeted: "1,384 days," which also happens to be the number of days until the next presidential election in November 2024.

Over the last week, Pompeo, a former congressman from Kansas, took to Twitter during his final week as secretary of state to gain more followers on his private Twitter account.

"In 26 hours, you'll only be able to follow me @mikepompeo. Serving as your Secretary of State has been a privilege and an honor. I'm immensely proud of the achievements we've had in the past four years," Pompeo tweeted on January 19.

Pompeo faced criticism on his last full day at the State Department this week after claiming that multiculturalism "is not who America is."

"Wokeism, multiculturalism, all the -isms — they're not who America is," Pompeo wrote in a tweet. "They distort our glorious founding and what this country is all about. Our enemies stoke these divisions because they know they make us weaker."

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'Full Scale Wartime Effort': Biden Signs Executive Orders for New COVID-19 Response Program
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Earlier on Thursday, the new director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, said the outgoing Trump administration's claim that the COVID-19 vaccine would be in every pharmacy by the end of February was wrong.

On his first full day in office, US President Joe Biden signed several executive orders and laid out his administration's plan for addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, including an effort to vaccinate 100 million Americans in the following 100 days.

"Things are going to continue to get worse before they get better," Biden frankly stated during the White House [press conference](#) on Thursday. "We didn't get into this mess overnight and it's going to take months for us to turn things around."

He noted that case and death numbers are going to continue to rise until the new efforts begin to have an effect, estimating that the US' COVID-19 death toll will pass 500,000 in the next month.

'Help is On the Way'

However, Biden had a message: "help is on the way," holding up [a 198-page guide](#) to his administration's COVID-19 response plan.

Among the executive actions Biden signed were the reimbursement of states for using their national guard to help with COVID-19 relief efforts; a "full scale wartime effort" using the Defense Production Act to increase the volume of essential medical items being manufactured; and an order giving schools funding for the resources they need in order to safely reopen.

He said a major goal of his first 100 days in office is to get 100 million Americans vaccinated.

"We will move heaven and earth" to do so, he said. The US population is 328 million.

Another goal of his first 100 days is a 100-day "mask up" challenge. Noting that medical experts have predicted Americans wearing masks could save 50,000 lives by April, Biden said he had ordered a mask mandate on federal property and that another order would soon follow for inter-state transit on buses, trains and aircraft.

"It's a patriotic act," Biden said about mask-wearing. "They're the single best thing we can do ... more important than the vaccines."

New Federal Initiatives

Biden said he is directing the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to start standing up the first federally-supported community vaccination centers, with the goal of standing up 100 such centers in the next month.

He also said the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would launch a federal pharmacy program to send COVID-19 vaccines to local pharmacies by February 8, and that the Department of Health and Human Services would begin expanding the pool of medical professionals who can administer the vaccine in order to meet the nation's needs.

Biden announced the creation of a federal COVID-19 liaison for each US state and the launching of a federal COVID-19 testing board, to ensure that plentiful testing for the infectious respiratory disease is made available where it's needed.

Biden also announced the formation of a Health Equity Task Force to "ensure equality is at the core of every decision we make." He said some of its duties will include fighting disinformation in local communities and addressing vaccine hesitancy among parts of the population.

Biden said that in the interest of restoring public trust, he would ensure that scientific and medical experts would "speak directly to you," free from political interference and making decisions "based on science and health alone."

Reversing Trump Policies

In his first two days in office, Biden has use the power of his executive office to [reverse dozens](#) of policies implemented by former US President Donald Trump, including ending the Keystone XL oil pipeline, adding anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people, and rejoining the World Health Organization. His COVID-19 program is also a repudiation of Trump's legacy, including his longstanding hostility to mask mandates and the way his administration handled relations with state governments during the first 10 months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the campaign trail, Biden firmly blamed Trump for the destructive scale of the pandemic in the US, which he noted on Thursday contains just 4% of the world's population but has suffered 25% of the world's COVID-19 cases and 20% of the world's deaths from the disease. According to [data compiled](#) by the New York Times, at least 24.6 million Americans have contracted COVID-19 and at least 408,000 have died, with 100,000 of those deaths occurring in just the last month.

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France's Macron Refuses 'Repentance or Apologies' to Algeria for Colonization, War Brutalities by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

On Algerian Independence Day in July 2020, Paris returned to Algeria the skulls of 24 resistance fighters decapitated by French soldiers after their revolt against colonial rule was crushed in 1849.

The People's Democratic Republic of Algeria will not receive a formal apology from France for 132 years of colonial rule that included racial apartheid, a brutal war to block its independence, and nuclear weapons tests.

The office of French President Emmanuel Macron [said on Thursday](#) there would be "no repentance nor apologies" for French rule over Algeria. Instead, Macron will take part in several "symbolic acts" aiming to smooth over lasting enmity from the colonial period, which ended in a brutal war of independence that forced France from the country in 1962.

Symbolic Reconciliation

Those acts will include creating a "Memories and Truth" commission to "take a lucid look at the wounds of the past" and find a path to reconciliation, according to a [Wednesday statement](#) by Macron's office.

There will also be three symbolic days of remembrance in 2021 and 2022, marking their 60th anniversary.

On September 25, 2021, Macron will mark the National Day of the Harki, a holiday created in 2001 by then-President Jacques Chirac that commemorates the Muslim Algerians who served as auxiliaries to the French Army during its colonial rule over Algeria. After independence, Harkis were [widely regarded](#) by Algerian nationalists as traitors and many were killed in violent reprisals.

On October 17, 2021, they will mark the anniversary of the 1961 Algerian massacre in Paris by French National Police, who attacked an anti-war demonstration. Police acknowledged that at least 40 protesters were killed, but [some estimates](#) say as many as 200 died, including protesters who drowned in the River Seine after being thrown off of bridges by the police.

A third commemoration, on March 19, 2022, will mark the 60th anniversary of the Evian Accords, which ended the war and granted Algeria independence.

Macron's actions are based on an official report on "the progress made by France on the memory of the colonization of Algeria and the Algerian war" by historian Benjamin Stora, a French historian born in Constantine, Algeria, in 1950, whose family fled to France after independence along with other pieds noirs, or French settlers who enjoyed a superior legal and social status to native Algerians. Stora will also head the Memories and Truth commission. Algerians Denounce 'Very Great Crimes'

While Algiers has issued no formal reply to Macron's decision, Algerians spoke out in the media about the lack of apology.

"Concerning what Macron said and the important crimes of France in Algeria, we as Algerians must have a unified position between the people and the government against Macron and France to force them to recognize the crimes committed in Algeria, the very great crimes, the crimes against humanity without precedent in the world", Algerian civil servant Mostapha ben Zayed [told Africa News](#).

Lahwij Hicham, an Algerian student, told the outlet: "As an Algerian, I think that it is up to Algerian diplomacy to move forward and to denounce this position because France is considered one of the worst of colonialism. It has tortured and persecuted in particular by carrying out nuclear tests on the Algerian people. As Algerians, we must denounce this position, and France must recognize its crimes, murders, torture, and forced displacement of the Algerian people."

Bloody Colonial Wars

Between 1954 and 1962, the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) led an armed struggle against French colonial rule that used ambush tactics and terrorism to strike out against the numerically and technologically superior French military. On the French side, reprisals were often bloody and massive, and widespread use of torture of Algerian prisoners was recorded by observers such as [Frantz Fanon](#), a Martinican psychiatrist and pan-African revolutionary who treated victims of French captivity. The atrocities only worsened after French generals in Algeria [mounted a coup d'etat](#) in May 1958 that overthrew the Fourth French Republic and put Charles de Gaulle in the president's office, who gave them a freer hand to fight the FLN.

[According to estimates](#) by the FLN, who formed the new Algerian government and has ruled the country ever since, 1.5 million people died in the war, the vast majority of whom were Algerians, and another 1 million pieds noirs and Harkis fled the country after independence.

During the war, France also used Algeria's Sahara Desert to test its first [nuclear weapons](#), detonating 21 nuclear devices in the country in a series of above ground and underground tests. However, the war of independence was just one of many attempts by Algerians to throw off French rule. Another, led by Sheikh Bouziane in Kabylia in 1848 and 1849, ended in the massacre of the city of Zaatcha by French troops. Just a few years later, French forces crushed another revolt by Sherif Boughla in nearby Bordj Bou Arréridj Province in 1854. Both men were beheaded and their skulls taken to France; only in July 2020 were they [returned to Algiers](#) for burial.

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Rep. Greene Introduces Articles of Impeachment Against Biden Over Abuse of Power, Corruption
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Information and claims about the Biden family's business dealings were the source of major attacks against US President Joe Biden on the 2020 campaign trail, with Republicans regularly pressing for probing of the claims.

Articles of impeachment were introduced against Biden during his first full day in office on Thursday by Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA).

The statement said Greene seeks to impeach Biden for his "quid pro quo" activities in Ukraine and his "abuse of power by allowing his son, Hunter Biden, to siphon off cash from America's greatest enemies - Russia and China."

"President Biden has demonstrated that he will do whatever it takes to bail out his son, Hunter, and line his family's pockets with cash from corrupt foreign energy companies," Greene alleged in a statement on Thursday.

"We'll see how this goes," Greene said in a brief video posted to Twitter in which she announced the action. She [announced her plans](#) last week after former US President Donald Trump was separately impeached for inciting the January 6 insurrection.

"I would like to announce on behalf of the American people, we have to make sure our leaders are held accountable, we cannot have a president of the United States who is willing to abuse the power of the office of the presidency and be easily bought off by foreign governments, foreign [Chinese energy](#) companies, Ukrainian energy companies," Greene told conservative news outlet [Newsmax on January 13](#). The network was heavily promoted by Trump late in his presidency.

Another conservative Georgia Republican lawmaker, Rep. Austin Scott, [told local Sinclair](#) affiliate WGXA that while he opposed Trump's impeachment, he will also oppose Biden's.

"It's not possible to commit an impeachable offense as the President of the United States prior to being sworn in as the President of the United States and I absolutely do not intend to support her in this. You will not see my signature on that," Scott said on Tuesday.

Indeed, the move isn't likely to anywhere, since Democrats control both the House and the Senate.

QAnon and the January 6 Insurrection

Greene is the first person to be elected to federal office who openly believes in the QAnon conspiracy theory. Adherents to the theory believe that during his presidency, Trump was waging a war against a "Deep State" made up of global elites who worship Satan and manage a worldwide child sex trafficking ring. The theory likely originated on the 4chan anonymous internet message board in 2017.

Believers in QAnon [took part](#) in the January 6 uprising, which aimed to block Congressional certification of the November 3, 2020, election results. Trump claimed Biden's victory was fraudulent and at a "Stop the Steal" rally outside the White House in the hours before the insurrection, he urged his followers to take action in defense of American democracy. Five people died in the attack on the Capitol, but while they temporarily dispersed Congress and occupied and looted the building, police soon drove the rioters from the halls and the lawmakers reconvened.

Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris were sworn into office on Wednesday under the watchful eye of 25,000 US troops, who were brought in to garrison the capital city in case Trump's followers attempted further violent assaults, which [did not materialize](#).

Greene has condemned the violence at the Capitol, telling Newsmax that she "can't imagine people in this country being so fearful of a future of a Biden presidency that they may be willing to commit violence like they did at the Capitol."

"I do not condone that violence. The American people need hope, they need to know that there are Republicans in Congress that are willing to stand up and fight for them regardless of being a minority, regardless of having all odds against us, against me."

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UAE Signed Deal to Buy US F-35s Just One Hour Before Biden Was Sworn In as POTUS - Report

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US President Joe Biden has pledged to end US support for the war in Yemen by the Saudi-led coalition that includes the United Arab Emirates (UAE), whose Western-bought weapons have been spotted in the hands of Yemeni militias, including Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Barely an hour before Biden was sworn into office, the outgoing Trump administration [signed an agreement](#) with the United Arab Emirates to sell the Persian Gulf country 50 of its Lockheed Martin F-35A stealth fighters.

The jets are part of a huge \$23.3 billion weapons sale that includes 18 MQ-9B Reaper drones and a slew of anti-air and anti-surface missiles. While the final delivery schedule is unclear, drafts of the agreement stated deliveries would begin in 2027.

The possibility it might be able to buy the advanced fighter jet was [a major part](#) of Washington convincing Abu Dhabi to a historic rapprochement with Israel last September. Israel is presently the only Middle East nation that operates the F-35 and maintaining Israel's strategic superiority to other nations is a key part of US policy.

However, critics accused the Trump administration of rushing the deal after the State Department [gave its approval](#) in early November. After [Democratic lawmakers](#) mounted a failed bid to block the sale, the New York Center for Foreign Policy Affairs announced a lawsuit against the State Department, saying the deal contained no provision to stop the UAE from sharing the F-35's proprietary information with other nations.

The advanced jets sport not only a stealthy design and coating, but a slew of advanced avionics, [computers, and sensors](#) as well. Congress forced [Turkey's removal](#) from the F-35 program in 2019 on news Ankara had also purchased Russian-made S-400 air defense systems. Pentagon leaders feared operating the two systems in close proximity would be too revealing of the F-35's capabilities and weaknesses, of which Russia or other nations using the S-400 could make use.

The incoming Biden administration still has the ability to undo the last-minute deal, and during the transition period Biden's team made clear their hostility to the slew of attempted "midnight rules" the Trump administration attempted to push through before he left office. Biden has [already reversed](#) some of them by executive order, including one move that legalized discrimination against transgender people seeking to use homeless shelters and certain other facilities that receive funds from the federal government.

Biden Likely to End Yemen War Support

Indeed, Biden has [previously pledged](#) to end US support for the Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen, of which the UAE is a key part.

Among other examples, Biden signed a [2018 open letter](#) alongside his future secretary of state, Antony Blinken, and future director of national intelligence, Avril Haines, in which they called on then-US President Donald Trump to end US support for the Saudi war effort. He will likely have congressional support as well, since even the Republican-controlled Senate passed [a 2019 resolution](#) calling on Trump to end US support for the war, although in the end Trump vetoed the measure.

The war in Yemen has been raging since 2015, when ousted Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi fled to Riyadh seeking help in defeating the Houthi movement, a Zaidi Shiite sect that revolted against government measures they claimed were exacerbating poverty in the already-poor country. The Saudi-led coalition, which includes the UAE and formerly included Sudan and Morocco, among others, began an intense bombing campaign and funneled support to friendly militias in Yemen, while also instituting a blockade that has allowed hunger, cholera, and COVID-19 to ravage the population.

The US has also supported the coalition, providing [refueling services](#) and targeting information for coalition aircraft and running [Special Forces patrols](#) against Houthi installations near the Saudi-Yemeni border.

However, the impact of Western support extends beyond logistics: [investigations have revealed](#) that weapons and vehicles sold to coalition allies [have wound up](#) in the hands of pro-Saudi militia groups, including AQAP, the terrorist group's local franchise. That includes not only small arms but also mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs), tanks, and artillery pieces.

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Florida Bank Cuts Ties With Trump, Closes Accounts After Deadly Capitol Riot
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In the wake of the January 6 Capitol riot, several organizations have severed relations with former US President Donald Trump and the Trump Organization, after the ex-president was largely blamed for inciting the deadly event.

Bank United, a financial institution based in Miami Lakes, Florida, announced Thursday that it was cutting all ties with Trump, just one day after the former president officially exited from the White House.

A spokesperson with the firm informed Bloomberg in an [emailed statement](#) that the company "never had a lending relationship" with Trump, and that "we no longer have any depository relationship with him."

According to a set of [financial disclosures](#), Trump held two money market accounts - a type of account which typically yields a higher interest rate - with the firm that held upwards of \$5.1 million. The documents do not give specific dollar amounts, but rather ranges.

Bank United did not offer a specific reason for ending its financial relationship with Trump.

The development came after several banks, including Professional Bank, Signature Bank and Deutsche Bank called it quits - or began the process - with Trump after the Capitol insurrection. Signature Bank, which closed two of Trump's personal accounts with about \$5 million, specifically stated that it refused to "do business in the future with any members of Congress who voted to disregard the Electoral College," according to [a statement](#) obtained by NBC News, which noted that the firm also called on Trump to resign.

"We have never before commented on any political matter and hope to never do so again," the statement read. "To witness a rioter sitting in the presiding chair of the US Senate and our elected representatives being told to seek cover under their seats is appalling and an insult to the Republic."

As for Deutsche Bank, the firm is [reportedly](#) looking to pass an estimated \$340 million in loans onto another lender in order to make the cutting of ties official. Incidentally, the latest announcements came while the German multinational investment bank, which Trump has favored for decades, remains under investigation by the office of New York Attorney General Letitia James over allegations that Trump inflated his asset values.

The Trump Organization has not issued any remarks in regards to the Bank United development.

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US Congress Approves Waiver to Allow Gen. Lloyd Austin to Serve as Biden's Defense Secretary
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI), who previously said he would not back the waiver that prohibits recently retired officers from leading the US Department of Defense, notably reneged on his vow Wednesday, claiming retired Gen. Lloyd Austin is "exceptionally qualified" and "will restore direction to [the] Pentagon."

With a 326-78 vote, the House of Representatives approved on Thursday a necessary waiver that would otherwise forbid Austin, who retired from the US armed forces in 2016, from being considered for defense secretary. The waiver was subsequently cleared through the US Senate, with 69 US senators voting in favor of granting the much-needed waiver.

A total of 15 Democrats and 63 Republicans opposed the measure in the House chamber. Per The National Security Act of 1947, the leader of the Pentagon must be a civilian and be well-removed from military service at the time of consideration.

"That a person who has within ten years been on active duty as a commissioned officer in a Regular component of the armed services shall not be eligible for appointment as Secretary of Defense," the law read. However, a 2008 change in legislation reduced the required period from 10 years to only seven years.

"There were universal accolades for the man but a concern about the precedent it sets," an unnamed House Democrat told [The Hill](#) on a call following the vote.

Earlier Thursday, Senate Armed Services Committee moved to approve the waiver that allowed them to then vote and ultimately approve Biden's nomination of Austin for the position of defense secretary.

Committee approval on the matters followed extensive conversations related to Jim Mattis, the retired Marine general who received a waiver from Congress and went on to be Trump's first defense secretary. Mattis would ultimately resign from Trump's cabinet after more than a year and a half of policy disagreements.

At the time, Senate Republicans and Democrats within the committee united in widely bipartisan, 81-17 vote.

However, when discussions on Biden's nominee were held earlier this week, Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) argued that he would not vote to approve another waiver.

"I supported the waiver for Gen. Mattis with reservations four years ago, which I quickly came to view as a mistake and I have since regretted," remarked Cotton, an Army veteran with tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, as reported [by NPR](#). "Unfortunately, I must announce that I oppose the waiver of the seven-year cooling-off period."

Sens. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Tammy Duckworth and Elizabeth Warren also opposed the waiver in their Thursday committee vote. Blumenthal and Duckworth are both US veterans.

"Let me say at the outset that I understand and respect the reservations some of you have expressed about having another recently retired general at the head of the Department of Defense," he said during his Tuesday confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"The safety and security of our democracy demands competent civilian control of our armed forces, the subordination of military power to the civil."

Austin also pledged to lawmakers that, if confirmed, he will carry out his job "always with the goal to deter war."

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Additional 900,000 Americans Filed Unemployment a Week Before Biden Took Office
Bryan Woolston
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US President Joe Biden's proposed \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 stimulus proposal calls on Congress to raise the supplemental unemployment benefit to \$400 a week, a \$100 increase from the weekly payments approved by lawmakers just last month.

The US Department of Labor announced in its weekly unemployment data [news release](#) that 900,000 Americans filed new unemployment claims within the week ending on January 16.

The document also revealed that at least 423,734 individuals in 47 states filed new claims for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance.

"The drop in jobless claims supports our view that last week's leap was a fluke, due to seasonal adjustment problems which start over Thanksgiving and persist well into January," Ian Shepherdson, chief economist for Pantheon Macroeconomics, told [Yahoo Finance](#) in an emailed statement.

"We expect claims to drop again next week, to about 750K; the trend rose late last fall as the third COVID wave built, but is now about flat, albeit at a very high level."

According to the document, the previous week was revised from 965,000 new claims to 926,000 new claims.

The DoL data comes just a day after Biden was sworn into office.

While 46 has just entered office, the US president has already presented the "American Rescue Plan," a \$1.9 trillion stimulus proposal that includes a third round of direct COVID-19 relief payments to Americans and \$416 billion in funding for the administration's push to vaccinate 100 million Americans and reopen US schools within the first 100 days of the presidency.

Mark Zandi, a chief economist for Moody's Analytics, told [Fox Business](#) host Maria Bartiromo on Thursday that he believes Biden's COVID relief package is "a good step."

"The economy is clearly struggling with the pandemic," Zandi noted, highlighting a decline in retail sales for December.

"If we hadn't gotten that \$900 billion fiscal rescue package through Congress and signed by President Trump late in December, we'd probably go back into recession in early 2021."

"In a typical economy they'd be a couple hundred thousand per week, so the economy is clearly struggling with the pandemic and it needs more help," he detailed.

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Muslim Rights Group Vows to Work With Congress on Preventing More Trump-Like Travel Bans

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) welcomes President Joe Biden's order to terminate his predecessor's Muslim travel ban policy, but also plans to work with US lawmakers to prevent future administrations from repeating this mistake, CAIR's Maryland Office Director Zainab Chaudry told Sputnik. Biden, shortly after being inaugurated on Wednesday, among a flurry of executive measures, signed an order to reverse former President Donald Trump's ban on travelers from several majority-Muslim countries.

"We're grateful to President Biden for keeping his word on Day one," Chaudry said. "We plan to work in Congress on [a] bill to ensure that this is no longer an issue."

The original ban, signed in 2017, affected travelers and refugees from Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. A later version included only five Muslim states in addition to Venezuela and North Korea.

"It affected people of color and was discriminatory on its face and in intent," she said. "These executive orders do not keep our country safe."

Chaudry called the termination of the travel ban "a huge burst of relief" for families affected by the discriminatory policy. This included many who needed medical attention, wanted to be reunited with family members, and others hoping to study in the US.

She cited examples of an Iranian who was not able to travel to their mother's funeral and a Libyan family with a member who was sick and unable to come to the United States for treatment. That person died. Then there was the case of a Sudanese family whose daughter was engaged to a man in Sudan, but the family had great difficulty trying to get him to the US. She said CAIR, as a non-partisan organization, does not align within any specific US political party in their effort to promote policies that protect American Muslim civil rights.

"We just ask them [lawmakers] to vote their conscience and not vote for bills that would hurt us," Chaudry said.

In a 5-4 ruling in 2018, the Supreme Court's conservative majority upheld Trump's travel ban, arguing that the president has the power to secure the country's borders and make national security judgments within the realm of immigration. Trump officials refuted allegations that the ban unfairly targeted Muslims, noting that the later version included two non-Muslim countries.

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Incoming US Treasury Secretary Yellen Vows to Stay Tough on Russia Over Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's nominee for Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen, pledged during her confirmation hearing to stay tough regarding US sanctions against Russia as part of the United States' policy to exact a price for Moscow's alleged territorial aggression in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

"If confirmed, I will work closely with the White House and counterparts at other agencies across the administration on US policy toward Russia," Yellen said on Thursday. "I commit to rigorously

enforcing sanctions targeting Russian actors for territorial aggression in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea and other threats to US national security."

Under the Trump administration, the United States had imposed sanctions against Russian officials and entities over Ukraine, and President Biden upon assuming office on Wednesday did not signal his administration would change course.

Relations between Washington and Moscow have been strained since 2014 over the Ukrainian crisis and Crimea rejoining Russia. The United States, together with its allies, then began introducing successive rounds of sanctions against Russia.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled earlier that the Ukrainian authorities had deliberately used ill-treatment, excessive force, unlawful detention and abduction of protesters within a campaign to disrupt initially peaceful protests.

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UPDATE 2 - Senate Republican Leader McConnell Proposes Starting Trump Impeachment Trial in February

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell proposed beginning former President Donald Trump's impeachment trial in February, his office said in a statement.

The US House impeached Trump last week, charging him with inciting the January 6 riot on Capitol Hill. Trump has rejected the allegations, saying the speech he delivered before the protesters stormed Capitol Hill was "totally appropriate." Trump supporters were trying to prevent Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's election victory.

"Leader McConnell has asked for [articles of impeachment delivery] to occur on Thursday, January 28. Former President Trump would have one week from that day to answer the articles of impeachment (February 4). The House's pre-trial brief would also be due then," McConnell's office said in a statement on Thursday. "The President would then have one week from the day he submits his answer to submit his pre-trial brief (February 11). That means former president Trump has fourteen total days from when we issue the summons to write his pre-trial brief. The House would also submit its replication on this date. The House would then have two days to submit their rebuttal pre-trial brief (February 13)."

Several media outlets reported that Senator Lindsey Graham told Republican colleagues on a conference call that Trump has hired South Carolina attorney Butch Bowers to serve as his impeachment defense counsel.

McConnell in the statement said he sent the proposal to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.

"Given the unprecedented speed of the House's process, our proposed timeline for the initial phases includes a modest and reasonable amount of additional time for both sides to assemble their arguments before the Senate would begin to hear them," the Republican leader said.

The lawmaker also said the proposed approach "tracks the structure of the Clinton and Trump pre-trial processes. The periods between due dates are longer than in 1999 or 2020, but this is necessary because of the House's unprecedented timeline."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told reporters on Thursday that in the next few days she will hold consultations about when to submit the article impeachment against former Trump to the Senate for trial.

McConnell was the Senate majority leader before the Democrats took control as a result of the November 2020 election and two special elections held in Georgia earlier this month.

On January 13, one week before Biden took office, the US House voted 232-197 to impeach Trump on charges of inciting violence against the US government. Although Trump is no longer president, the Senate could still convict him and vote to ban him from ever running for office again.

It was the second time Trump was impeached by the Democratic-controlled House. The first time he was acquitted by the Senate in February of last year (with only 1 Republican voting in favor of one article of impeachment).

However, unlike the impeachment over the Ukraine aid scandal, Republican House lawmakers broke rank - with ten voting to impeach Trump.

It will take 67 votes in the 100-seat Senate to convict Trump on the impeachment charges. This would require 17 Republican senators to break rank.

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Sixth of Canadian Small Businesses Consider Closing for Good, 2.4Mln Jobs at Risk - Study

TORONTO, January 21 (Sputnik) - A sixth of Canadian small businesses impacted by the COVID-19-related restrictions are contemplating closing for good, potentially putting 2.4 million jobs in jeopardy, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) said in a report.

"One in six (181,000) Canadian small business owners are seriously contemplating permanently closing, putting more than 2.4 million jobs at risk (20 per cent of private sector jobs)," the report said on Thursday.

The number represents a mid-range estimate of the potential impact of the restrictions and the advocacy says as few as 71,000 or as much as 222,000 businesses could close permanently by the end pandemic. Thursday's estimates are in addition to the 58,000 businesses that closed up shop in 2020, the report added.

CFIB President and CEO Dan Kelly has previously called Canada's COVID-19 response a "mess" and questioning the effectiveness of lockdown measures in place across much of the country.

A resurgent coronavirus pandemic is expected further complicate Canada's economic recovery, with Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem saying on Wednesday that he expects the country's economy to contract by 2.5 percent in the first quarter of 2021 and warning of steeper declines if restrictive measures are extended or strengthened.

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US Must Not Lose New START Nuclear Treaty's Intrusive Inspection Tools - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US military needs to get the decade-old New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) renewed urgently to be able to use its agreed "intrusive inspection" mechanisms to keep track of Russia's strategic nuclear forces, Defense Department spokesman John Kirby said.

"We cannot afford to lose New START's intrusive inspection and notification tools," Kirby, a Trump administration appointee, said on Thursday. "Failing to swiftly extend New START would weaken America's understanding of Russia's long-range nuclear forces."

White House spokesperson Jen Psaki confirmed to reporters that new US President Joe Biden will aim to reach a five-year extension of the New START treaty with Russia.

Kirby said the New START was the only remaining treaty constraining Russian nuclear forces and remained an anchor of strategic stability between the two countries, he said.

The Washington Post earlier reported on Thursday citing two senior US officials that Biden will seek a five-year extension of New START, which caps nuclear arsenals of Russia and the United States.

The New START Treaty expires on February 5, but can be prolonged for another half a decade.

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Canada Governor General Resigns Ahead of Report Release Noting Harassment at Rideau Hall

TORONTO, January 21 (Sputnik) - The Queen's official representative in Canada, Governor General Julie Payette, issued a statement announcing her resignation ahead of the release of a report that details a toxic work culture at Rideau Hall.

Earlier on Thursday, multiple Canadian outlets reported that the Privy Council Office is expected to deliver a "scathing" report concerning the allegations made earlier this summer of widespread harassment of employees at Rideau Hall - the Monarch or its representative's residence in Ottawa - by Payette and her secretary, Assunta Di Lorenzo.

"It is with sureness and humility, but also with pride over what was accomplished during my tenure as Governor General and in my service to the country for the past 28 years, that I have submitted my resignation," the former astronaut said on Thursday.

However, Payette noted that no formal complaints or official grievances were made during her tenure and that her resignation comes at an "opportune time" to take care of family issues. Payette thanked Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for appointing her to the position and said that he has been informed of her decision.

In a statement, Trudeau said that her resignation has been received but offered no words of gratitude instead choosing to underscore the need for a positive working environment at all levels of government.

"Every employee in the Government of Canada has the right to work in a safe and healthy environment, and we will always take this very seriously. Today's announcement provides an opportunity for new leadership at Rideau Hall to address the workplace concerns raised by employees during the review," Trudeau said.

The Chief Justice of Canada, Richard Wagner, will fulfill the duties of the Governor General in the interim, the Prime Minister said.

Trudeau's choice of Payette, a former astronaut, was initially celebrated as evidence of the Prime Minister's commitment to progressive policies. However, the adulation was short-lived, after it was revealed that Payette was accused of second-degree assault in the US, a charge that was later expunged, and was found not-at-fault in a deadly car accident.

The Governor General would again come under fire this summer when at least 16 employees came forward to say that Payette and Di Lorenzo cultivated a toxic workplace, which led to the resignation of some workers and emotional breakdowns by others.

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US Fossil Fuel Group Drops Objections to Methane Restrictions, Wants to Work With Biden

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The American Petroleum Institute (API), a leading trade group that lobbied the Trump administration to roll back regulations on methane emissions, signaled the Biden administration that it wants to help draft new methane rules, API Chief Executive Mike Summers said in a press release.

"Any discussion of addressing the risks of climate change should include a focus on reducing methane emissions from natural gas and oil production," Summers said in the release on Thursday.

While affordable, reliable energy provided by natural gas and oil is essential to our modern economy and Americans' everyday lives, lowering methane emissions from that production also is essential, Summers added.

While large API members such as Exxon Mobile and Shell have long expressed willingness to accept methane limits, API answers to more than 600 energy companies in its membership. API has signaled to President Biden's team that it wants to work with the administration on new regulations that can lower emissions responsible for climate change while also supplying US energy needs, the release said.

While most of the attention on climate changes focuses on carbon emissions, many scientists warn that methane is a far more potent greenhouse gas.

Pentagon says US cannot afford to lose New START's intrusive inspection tools, failing to extend would weaken America intelligence on Russian forces

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Canada Governor General Resigns Ahead of Report Release Noting Harassment at Rideau Hall

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Earlier on Thursday, multiple Canadian outlets reported that the Privy Council Office is expected to deliver a "scathing" report concerning the allegations made earlier this summer of widespread harassment of Rideau Hall employees, including by Payette and her secretary.

"It is with sureness and humility, but also with pride over what was accomplished during my tenure as Governor General and in my service to the country for the past 28 years, that I have submitted my resignation," the former astronaut said on Thursday.

Payette said that she has informed Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of her decision.

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Biden Tasks US Intelligence to Prepare Full Review of Russia's Activities - White House

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters that President Joe Biden has tasked the US intelligence agencies with preparing a thorough review of alleged activities undertaken by Russia.

"Even as we work with Russia to advance US interests, so we work to hold Russia to account for its reckless and adversarial actions. And to this end, the president is also issuing a tasking to the intelligence community for its full assessment of the SolarWinds cyber breach, Russian interference in the 2020 election, its use of chemical weapons against opposition leader Alexey Navalny and the alleged bounties on the US soldiers in Afghanistan," Psaki said.

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik the United States is using the media to spread different versions of what caused the SolarWinds cyberattack, but it never showed any proof that Russia was complicit in it.

Berlin claims that German doctors found evidence of poisoning with a nerve agent from the Novichok group in Navalny's body, which is refuted by Moscow. Navalny returned to Russia on Sunday after receiving treatment in Germany following a suspected poisoning in Siberia.

Navalny was detained at a Moscow airport upon arrival over multiple violations of probation. In June, the New York Times newspaper reported that US intelligence officials had informed President Donald Trump about suspected Russia effort to place bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan. Trump dismissed the claims as a "hoax" and several senior US military officials said that the intelligence was unconvincing. Russian officials in turn issued multiple denials of the claims. The Taliban called the Russian bounty allegations "propaganda."

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McConnell Proposes 2-Week Window for Trump to Prepare Impeachment Defense - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell wants to give former President Donald Trump two weeks to prepare a defense for his impeachment trial in the Senate, Politico reported.

McConnell told Republican senators that he would propose to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer that the former president have until early-February to prepare his case, according to two unnamed sources briefed on a conference call Thursday, the report said on Thursday. Speaker Nancy Pelosi has not yet transmitted the article of impeachment to the Senate, an act would trigger a Senate trial, according to the US Constitution.

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US Congresswoman Greene Introduces Articles of Impeachment Against Biden

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene announced that she introduced articles of impeachment against President Joe Biden over alleged corruption.

"President Joe Biden is unfit to hold the office of the Presidency. His pattern of abuse of power as President Obama's Vice President is lengthy and disturbing. President Biden has demonstrated that he will do whatever it takes to bail out his son, Hunter, and line his family's pockets with cash from corrupt foreign energy companies," Greene alleged in a statement on Thursday.

The statement said Greene seeks to impeach Biden for his "quid pro quo" activities in Ukraine and his "abuse of power by allowing his son, Hunter Biden, to siphon off cash from America's greatest enemies - Russia and China."

Biden has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing and connection to his son's business operations.

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White House Confirms Biden to Seek 5-Year Extension of New START Treaty With Russian

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki confirmed to reporters that US President Joe Biden will aim to reach a 5-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia.

"I can confirm that the United States intends to seek a 5-year extension of New START as the treaty permits," Psaki said on Thursday. "The President has long been clear that the New START treaty is in the national security interest of the United States. This extension makes even more sense when the relationship with Russia is adversarial as it is at this time. New START is the only remaining treaty constraining Russian nuclear forces and is an anchor of strategic stability between our two countries."

The Washington Post reported on Thursday citing two senior US officials that Biden will seek a five-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) pact that caps nuclear arsenals of Russia and the United States.

The only nuclear arms control regime in effect between the two countries expires on February 5, but can be prolonged for another half a decade.

Russia is open for substantive dialogue with the United States on the extension of New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) and believes that it is still possible for it to be prolonged, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

Biden's administration plans to engage with Russia "very quickly" on the treaty and wants to have an extension, his nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said Tuesday during his a confirmation hearing.

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Fauci Says South African Strain of Coronavirus 'Concerning,' Not Detected in US Yet

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci said in a press briefing that the coronavirus mutation first identified in South Africa is concerning but has not been detected in the United States yet.

"The one [COVID-19 strain] in South Africa is a little bit more concerning. But nonetheless, not something that we don't think that we can handle," Fauci said on Thursday. "Thus far, it does not appear at all that the South African strain is in the United States."

However, Fauci noted that the level of virus surveillance in the United States is not at the level he would have liked to see.

Fauci also said that according to the existing data, vaccines will still be effective against the South African strain, and the UK variant of the coronavirus.

On December 18, South Africa reported the detection of a new coronavirus variant on its soil. This mutation and the one found in the United Kingdom have since spread across the world.

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Biden Tasks US Intelligence to Prepare Full Review of Russia's Activities - White House

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters that President Joe Biden has tasked the US intelligence agencies to prepare a thorough review of Russia's actions, including the interfering in the 2020 US elections and poisoning opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

"Even as we work with Russia to advance US interests, so we work to hold Russia to account for its reckless and adversarial actions. And to this end, the president is also issuing a tasking to the intelligence community for its full assessment of the SolarWinds cyber beach, Russian interference in the 2020 election, its use of chemical weapons against opposition leader Alexey Navalny and the alleged bounties on the US soldiers in Afghanistan," Psaki said.

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US Senate Approves Waiver to Allow Austin to Serve as Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday approved a waiver to allow retired four-star general Lloyd Austin to serve as secretary of defense despite his recent military service.

More than 60 senators voted in favor of granting the waiver, which exempts Austin from a law that bars anyone who has been out of the military for less than seven years from serving as secretary of defense. Austin, previously the head of US Central Command (CENTCOM), retired from the military in 2016.

The waiver had passed the House of Representatives earlier in the day. It must be signed into law before Senators can then vote on confirmation of President Joe Biden's nomination of Austin as next Pentagon chief.

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UK Strain of Novel Coronavirus Present in About 20 or More US States - Fauci

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The mutated coronavirus strain first discovered in the United Kingdom is now present in 20 or more US states, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci told reporters.

"The mutants in the UK, which we know are in about 20 plus states," Fauci said during a press briefing on Thursday.

In December, the United Kingdom informed the WHO of a mutated variant of the novel coronavirus, which is reported to be 70 percent more transmissible than other strains. Although the new strain has not been proven to be more pathogenic, some countries shut their borders and suspended travel with the United Kingdom. The closures, however, has so far not prevented the strain from spreading.

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US House Approves Waiver to Allow Lloyd Austin to Serve as Defense Secretary

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The House voted 326-78 in favor of granting the waiver, which exempts him from a law that bars anyone who has been out of the military for less than seven years from serving as Secretary of Defense. Austin, previously the head of US Central Command, retired from the military in 2016. The waiver must still be approved by the Senate before Senators can then vote on confirmation of President Joe Biden's nomination of Austin as Secretary of Defense. If confirmed, Austin would become the first ever African-American to serve as secretary of defense.

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Dr. Fauci Says Number of Coronavirus Cases May Be Plateauing in US

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci told reporters that the number of novel coronavirus cases in the United States may be plateauing.

"When you look more recently at the seven day average of cases - remember we were going between 300,000 and 400,000 and 200,000 and 300,000 - right now it looks like it might be actually plateauing in the sense of turning around," Fauci said during a press conference on Thursday.

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Majority of US Adults View Trump as 'Worst President' in Past Half Century

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - A 55 percent majority of American voters view former President Donald Trump as the worst president in the past 50 years, according to a Scott Rasmussen poll on Thursday.

"Fifty-five percent of voters nationwide rate Donald Trump as the worst president of the past half-century. A Scott Rasmussen national survey found that Barack Obama came in a distant second at 25%, with no other recent president reaching double digits," a press release explaining the poll said.

On the flip side, 39 percent rated Obama as the best president of the past half century with Ronald Reagan a distant second for 22 percent, the release said.

Apart from views of individual presidents, the results highlight how deeply entrenched the US partisan divide has become. Fifty percent of voters selected a Democrat as the best president while 49 percent selected a Republican, according to the release.

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US Condemns Baghdad Terror Attack, Offers Condolences to Victims' Families - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has denounced the terror attack that took place in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad earlier and left dozens dead and had offered condolences to the families of the victims, State Department Acting Secretary Daniel Smith said in a statement.

"We condemn in the strongest possible terms today's terrorist attacks in Baghdad," Smith said Thursday. "They were vicious acts of mass murder and a sobering reminder of the terrorism that continues to threaten the lives of innocent Iraqis. We extend our deepest condolences to the families of the victims and hope for a speedy recovery of those wounded."

A representative of the Iraqi Health Ministry said earlier in the day that 32 people were killed in a twin suicide bombing attack that hit a packed market in central Baghdad. No group has claimed responsibility for the bombing, but the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia) was responsible for many suicide attacks in Iraq in the past.

Several countries, including Russia, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Iran, have strongly condemned the bombing.

The Iranian embassy said that Tehran stood by its neighbor and was ready to offer any possible assistance to Iraq in its fight against jihadists, according to the Mehr news agency.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Thursday that the Russian Embassy has not yet had any contacts with the new administration of president Joe Biden.

* US President Joe Biden will seek a five-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) pact that caps nuclear arsenals of Russia and the United States, the Washington Post reported citing two senior administration officials.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in a phone conversation with his Cuban counterpart, Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, categorically condemned the United States' decision to include Cuba in the State Sponsors of Terrorism list, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* Russia hopes to get a response from the administration of US President Joe Biden to its proposals on relations between Moscow and Washington, the ball is now on the US side, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

BIDEN SIGNS EXECUTIVE ORDERS ON COVID-19

* US President Joe Biden on Thursday signed a number of executive orders to mobilize the federal government to provide a unified response to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic in the United States.

* Biden signed an executive order directing steps to enhance the federal government's collection, production sharing, and analysis of specific data related to COVID-19 response and recovery.

* Biden signed an executive order to support reopening and continuing operation of schools and child care facilities, which direct the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to provide guidance on safe operating.

* Biden also signed executive orders calling for taking additional measures such as establishing a National Pandemic Testing Board as well as expanding access for equitable COVID-19 treatment.

* Biden announced that travelers flying to the United States from foreign countries will be required to quarantine upon arrival and pass a coronavirus test before departure.

NORD STREAM 2 DEVELOPMENTS

* US extraterritorial sanctions against companies involved in Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, expected to carry Russian gas to Europe, are "inappropriate," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Thursday.

* The latest US sanctions against the Fortuna pipelayer, which is involved in the construction of gas pipeline project Nord Stream 2, are blatant disregard for the norms of fair competition, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* European Parliament lawmakers have introduced a resolution at Thursday's session calling to halt the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and issue new sanctions on Russia over the arrest of opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

NURSING HOME FIRE IN UKRAINE

* Rescuers are extinguishing fire in a building that has been converted into a nursing home in Kharkiv, as a result of the fire 15 people were killed and another five were injured, the Ukrainian State Emergency Service said on Thursday.

MOLDOVA'S DECISION ON RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

* The Constitutional Court of Moldova declared the law on the functioning of languages, which provides that the Russian language in the country is the language of interethnic communication, unconstitutional, the court's head, Domnica Manole, said.

* Moscow deeply regrets the decision of the Moldovan Constitutional Court to downgrade the status of the Russian language, and considers it opportunistic, the Russian language will not cease to be the language of interethnic communication, an informed Russian source told Sputnik.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she had offered Russian President Vladimir Putin help from a German watchdog to get EU approval for Russia's Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus.

* Certain European nations are interested in Russia's Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus, with talks on its production ongoing between Russia and Germany, the head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said.

* Hungary became the first country in the European Union to authorize Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, the RDIF said.

NAVALNY CASE

* Russian Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov said that there was every reason to call Alexey Navalny the person who committed a crime.

* Lyubov Sobol, a close ally of Navalny, was arrested in Moscow for urging his supporters to attend an unauthorized street protest, her lawyer told Sputnik.

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Biden Signs Executive Orders on COVID-19 Response

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday signed a number of executive orders in an attempt to address the novel coronavirus pandemic in the United States.

"President Biden issued Executive Order Organizing and Mobilizing the US Government to Provide a Unified And Effective Response to Combat COVID-19 and to Provide United States Leadership on Global Health and Security establishing a White House COVID-19 national response structure to coordinate across the US government and restoring the White House Directorate on Global Health Security and Biodefense established by the Obama-Biden Administration," the White House revealed in its COVID-19 National Strategy.

Another order directing steps to enhance federal government's collection, production sharing, and analysis of specific data related to COVID-19 response and recovery, the COVID-19 National Strategy said.

Biden also signed an order to support reopening and continuing operation of schools and child care facilities, which direct the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to provide guidance on safe operating, the COVID-19 National Strategy said.

"Additionally, the President issued Executive Order Promoting COVID-19 Safety in Domestic and International Travel which directs applicable agencies to take immediate action to require mask-wearing on many airplanes, trains, and certain other forms of public transportation in the United States," the COVID-19 National Strategy said.

A number of other orders call for additional measures such as establishing the National Pandemic Testing Board, expanding access to COVID-19 treatment, directing agencies to fill supply shortfalls.

Biden urged federal and local authorities to cooperate with each other implementing this strategy.

"It is a comprehensive plan that starts with restoring public trust and mounting an aggressive, safe, and effective vaccination campaign," he said.

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RPT - US House Approves Waiver to Allow Austin to Serve as Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday approved a waiver to allow retired general Lloyd Austin to serve as secretary of Defense despite his recent military service.

With voting still underway, a majority of lawmakers voted in favor of granting the waiver, which exempts him from a law that bars anyone who has been out of the military for less than seven years from serving as secretary of defense. Austin, previously the head of US Central Command, retired from the military in 2016.

The waiver must still be approved by the Senate before Senators can then vote on confirmation of President Joe Biden's nomination of Austin as secretary of defense.

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EMBARGO: US House Approves Waiver to Allow Austin to Serve as Defense Secretary

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US to Require Air Passengers to Quarantine on Arrival From Foreign Countries - Biden

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Travelers flying to the United States from foreign countries will be required to quarantine upon their arrival and pass a coronavirus test before departure, US President Joe Biden announced on Thursday.

"In light of the new COVID variants that we are learning about we are instituting now a new measure for individuals flying into the United States from other countries. In addition to wearing masks everyone flying to the United States from another country will need to test before they get on that plane before they depart and quarantine when they arrive in America," Biden said as he was highlighting his strategy to counter the pandemic.

Pre-boarding COVID-19 testing on incoming overseas flights was first introduced by former President Donald Trump shortly before leaving office.

Biden also announced a new executive action that will extend masking requirements to interstate travel "like on trains, planes and buses." On Wednesday, he mandated wearing face masks and observing social distancing on federal property.

The president also urged "every American to mask up for the next 100 days."

"The mask has become a partisan issue, unfortunately. But it is a patriotic act," he said.

Biden predicted that the US death toll will top 500,000 next month from its current level of more than 408,000.

Biden called wearing masks "the single best thing we can do" and citing health experts estimated that this measure alone if implemented from now until April would save over 50,000 lives.

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Biden Says US COVID-19 Death Toll Likely to Exceed 500,000 in February

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The COVID-19 related death toll in the United States will likely exceed 500,000 by the month of February, President Joe Biden said during a press briefing on Thursday.

"The death toll will likely top 500,000 next month," Biden said, declaring that the COVID-19 memorial service conducted at the National Mall on Tuesday will likely not be the last one.

The president also appealed to Americans to wear facial coverings until April, which according to Biden will save 50,000 lives.

As of Thursday, Johns Hopkins University has logged over 24.5 million confirmed cases of the disease and more than 408,000 virus-related fatalities in the United States.

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"The death toll will likely top 500,000 next month," Biden said.

The US has more than 400,000 covid related deaths as of Thursday, according to Johns Hopkins University.

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US Navy Deploys Medical Team to Navajo Reservation to Battle Pandemic

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - About a dozen US Navy medical specialists are fighting the spread of COVID-19 at a Navajo reservation that spans two southwestern states, the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"Approximately 12 Navy personnel deployed to the Navajo Nation reservation in New Mexico and Arizona to provide support to the Northern Navajo Medical Center in Shiprock, New Mexico," the release said. "The medical personnel have been working side-by-side with civilian and US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps health care providers to help treat COVID-19 patients."

Each member of the Navy team can treat up to eight patients at a time in a ward set aside for COVID-19 victims that features an open room with beds positioned along side each other, the release said.

The medical center is part of the US Indian Health Service, an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services, which serves about 2.6 million American Indians and Alaska Natives who belong to 574 federally recognized tribes in 37 states, according to the release. A recent study by the US Centers for Disease Control found levels of COVID-19 infections in American Indian and Alaskan Native populations 3.5 times higher than among non-Hispanic Whites.

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US Senate Panel Advances Biden Defense Chief Nominee, House to Vote on Military Waiver

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Armed Services Committee approved President Joe Biden's nominee for Defense Secretary on Thursday.

"The Senate Armed Services Committee today voted by voice to favorably report the nomination of Lloyd Austin to be secretary of defense," the committee said in a statement. "The Senate will not vote to confirm Austin until the Committee receives and reviews Austin's replies to Questions for the Record."

The House will shortly vote to waive a current restriction banning former military officers from serving in the role.

Austin is a retired four star general who previously headed US Central Command (CENTCOM). He would be the first ever African-American to serve as secretary of defense.

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US, France, Germany Urge Libyan Parties to Finalize Adoption of Unified Gov't - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The United States, France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom issued a statement on Thursday calling on the sides in Libya to settle the adoption of a unified government through the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF).

"We encourage all Libyan parties to act urgently and in good faith to finalize the adoption through the LPDF of a unified and inclusive government," the statement said. "As participants in the Berlin Conference process and international partners of Libya, we will lend our full support to the LPDF's efforts."

The statement comes after Tuesday's announcement that LPDF participants approved by a majority vote a mechanism for selecting representatives of the executive branch in Libya, which will temporarily rule the country until elections are held.

The United States, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom welcome the LPDF vote in favor of the selection mechanism for a new interim executive authority, which will guide Libya toward national elections on December 24, the statement said.

"This is an important step towards Libyan unity. The LPDF's decision affirms the clear demands of the Libyan people that it is time for a change of the status quo," the statement added.

On Wednesday, The Egyptian Foreign Ministry announced that the parties to the Libyan conflict had reached an agreement on holding a referendum on the country's constitution. The date of the referendum was not specified in the message.

Talks between representatives of the Libyan State Council and members of the ruling Libyan parliament in the east of the country have been going on since Monday under the auspices of the UN Mission in Libya.

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US Judge Greenlights Lawsuit Against Powerful Gun Lobby - New York Attorney General

NEW YORK, January 21 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge rejected the National Rifle Association's bid to dismiss a lawsuit to dissolve the powerful gun lobby, state of New York Attorney General Letitia James said via Twitter on Thursday.

"A judge has ruled in our favor and denied the @NRA's attempts to dismiss our entire lawsuit against them and move the case to another court," James, who brought the action, said. "Today's order reaffirms that the @NRA does not get to dictate if and where they will answer for their unlawful actions."

The NRA, with nearly five million gun owners, is one of America's most powerful lobby groups. It is supported largely by the conservative Republican Party, which is likely to see more of its influence challenged under the administration of Democrat President Joe Biden, who took office on Wednesday after defeating his predecessor, Republican Donald Trump, in November's election.

Thursday's ruling by Justice Joel Cohen of the Manhattan Supreme Court came six days after the NRA filed for bankruptcy protection and said it planned to reincorporate in the more gun-friendly Texas, after 150 years in New York.

Bankruptcy filings typically freeze lawsuits against people or corporations. The NRA says its bankruptcy filing should halt the New York Attorney General's lawsuit alleging financial mismanagement and hopes James' case would be dismissed or transferred out of state. James had argued even before the ruling that the NRA did not have the provisions to do so. She said the gun lobby's actions were tantamount to "repeatedly and blatantly violating the rights of New Yorkers", and stressed that "no one is above the law - not even the individuals charged with enforcing it".

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Restaurants in US Capital to Resume Indoor Dining January 22 - Mayor

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser told reporters that restaurants in the US capital will start on Friday to gradually reopen for indoor dining which was banned as part of coronavirus mitigation measures.

"Beginning Friday, January 22, restaurants can allow indoor dining of 25 percent capacity or no more than 250 people, whichever is fewer," Bowser confirmed during a press briefing.

The municipality said that more guidance on other paused activities is "forthcoming." Indoor dining has been prohibited in the city since December 23 in an attempt to flatten a growing curve of coronavirus cases. The ban was set to expire on January 15, but Bowser extended it for another week in the wake of the US Capitol unrest and ahead of Joe Biden's presidential inauguration.

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Facebook Seeks Support for Trump Suspension From Independent Board

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Facebook's independent Oversight Board will have the final say in whether former US President Donald Trump's indefinite ban will become permanent, the social media giant said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, Facebook is referring its decision to indefinitely suspend former US President Donald Trump's access to his Facebook and Instagram accounts to the independent Oversight Board," the release said.

The release described the board an independent body whose decisions are binding: "They can't be overruled by CEO Mark Zuckerberg or anyone else at Facebook."

The release also included a vigorous defense of the Trump ban, which was imposed the day after a November 6 riot at the US Capitol by a group of the former president supporters who sought to protest the certification by lawmakers of elector slates from US states that Trump claims were invalid and robbed him of election victory.

"We hope, given the clear justification for our actions on January 7, that it will uphold the choices we made," the release said.

Facebook said it suspended Trump for violating a company policy banning use of the platform to incite violence.

The riot was preceded by a campaign-style rally near the White House, in which Trump urged his supporters to protest Congress' certification of the disputed electors by marching to Capitol Hill.

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Inauguration Security Barriers in US Capital to Come Down Within 36 Hours - Mayor

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US capital city authorities will remove security barriers near the National Mall within 36 hours, Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser told reporters on Thursday.

Intense security measures were taken to protect President Joe Biden's inauguration festivities on Wednesday in light of the recent Capitol Hill riot.

"Yesterday evening crews began removing barriers and fencing on major streets and opening garages that were blocked. The process will take approximately 36 hours," Bowser said during a press briefing.

City authorities already began opening streets near the Mall that have been closed for several days, she added.

On January 6, supporters of former President Donald Trump stormed the Capitol in a bid to prevent Congress from certifying Biden's victory.

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Guterres Looks Forward to Boosted UN-US Cooperation on Refugees, Migration - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres hopes that the ties between the world's body and the new US administration of Joe Biden on the issues of refugees and migration will be strengthened, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

Democrat Biden was sworn in as the 46th President of the United States on Wednesday. Just hours after the inauguration ceremony, he signed 17 executive orders, reversing a number of former President Donald Trump's policies.

"We welcomed the positive steps announced by the US administration relating to migration and refugees," Dujarric said. "The Secretary-General looks forward to working with the US administration to strengthen multilateral cooperation in these areas and hopes the US will join the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration."

Biden signed orders halting the construction of the US-Mexico border wall, ending the so-called Muslim travel ban and embracing the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program which grants temporary residency and work privileges to immigrants that were brought to the United States illegally as children.

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US Capital Requests National Guard to Stay Until January 30 for Biden Address to Congress

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The Washington, DC authorities said on Thursday that they have requested the National Guard support through January 30 to secure US President Joe Biden's address to Congress.

"Because we do anticipate that there will be another national special security event occurring the joint session of Congress, on behalf of the Metropolitan Police Department we have made a request for continued National Guard support with traffic management and crowd control through January 30," Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency Director Christopher Rodriguez told reporters.

Rodriguez also said the out of state National Guard troops will begin leaving the US capital as soon as Thursday.

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White House Confirms Biden to Keep FBI Director Wray on in Current Role

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki on Thursday confirmed that the Biden administration will keep incumbent FBI Director Wray on in his current post.

The confirmation comes after Psaki declined to comment on Wray's future during her first press briefing on Wednesday.

"I caused an unintentional ripple yesterday so wanted to state very clearly President [Joe] Biden intends to keep FBI Director Wray on in his role and he has confidence in the job he is doing," Psaki said in a tweet.

An unnamed official told CNBC earlier in the day that Biden had made the decision not to ditch Wray.

Wray, who was appointed by former President Donald Trump, is serving a ten-year term.

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UN Chief Appoints Senior Advisory Panel on Deconfliction Mechanism in Syria - Statement UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed an Independent Senior Advisory Panel that will seek ways to strengthen the humanitarian deconfliction mechanism in Syria, United Nations spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Thursday.

Humanitarian agencies provide information to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) through the deconfliction mechanism about the locations of civilian and humanitarian subjects in Syria. The United Nations has shared the coordinates with the US-led coalition forces, Russia and Turkey, to protect civilian facilities from possible attacks.

"Following consultations, the Secretary-General decided to appoint a three-person Independent Senior Advisory Panel on humanitarian deconfliction in the Syrian Arab Republic," the statement said. "The Panel will conduct its work independently and will provide the Secretary-General with advice on how to strengthen the deconfliction mechanism operated by OCHA in Syria."

The Advisory Panel, which has commenced its work on January 11, is composed of the Chair, Jan Egeland of Norway, Erika Feller of Australia and Radhouane Noucier from Tunisia.

The experts will also advise on the recommendations on the deconfliction mechanism presented by the Board of Inquiry and on lessons that can be learned, according to the statement. The panel will submit a final report to Guterres by May 10.

In 2019, Guterres announced that the internal Headquarters Board of Inquiry would investigate a series of incidents in which UN-supported facilities in a dozen locations in northwest Syria were destroyed or damaged in airstrikes since September 2017. The probe was launched after two-thirds of the UN Security Council expressed concern over the lack of inquiry.

In June, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said Russia decided to quit the deconfliction mechanism because it was abused by terrorists.

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Biden Should Recognize Value of UN Nuclear Ban Treaty - Arms Control Association

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's administration should embrace the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) as a way for other states to achieve disarmament obligations, the US Arms Control Association (ACA) said on Thursday. The TPNW, signed by more than 84 states after being passed in 2017, enters into force on Friday. The TPNW bans signatories from the development, production, testing, acquisition or transfer of nuclear weapons. All five permanent members of the UN Security Council oppose the pact because they fear it will undermine the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

"The incoming Biden administration should make it clear that the United States views the TPNW [as] a good faith effort by the majority of the world's nations to fulfill their own NPT-related disarmament obligations and help build the legal framework for the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons," former US State Department arms control official and ACA board chairman, Tom Countryman, said in the statement.

Under the NPT, which entered into force in 1970 and includes at least 190 states, the nuclear powers are supposed to pursue general and complete disarmament. The NPT also requires non-nuclear-weapon states to forego developing or acquiring nuclear weapons, according to the ACA.

The former US official also advised Biden to abandon the Trump administration's "clumsy" effort to force countries to "un-sign" the agreement. The US should rally support around a meaningful consensus and develop an action plan for the pivotal 10th NPT Review Conference in August 2021, he added.

The ACA is a US-based group of former officials and experts who promote effective arms control policies.

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UN Chief Looks Forward to Speaking to Biden At Earliest Convenience - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres looks forward to speaking with US President Joe Biden at his earliest convenience, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General looks forward to speaking to President Biden at his earliest convenience. The Secretary-General is available whenever, but obviously we fully understand that the new president has a long to-do list," Dujarric said.

Biden was sworn in as 46th US President on January 20 and on the same day signed an executive order to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement from which former President Donald Trump withdrew the United States in 2017.

Biden also signed an executive order to rejoin the United States in the UN World Health Organization, which Trump abandoned in July.

Dujarric said that the actions taken by Biden immediately after assuming office send a very strong signal about the future UN-US cooperation.

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US House Minority Leader Seeks Non-Partisan Probe of January 6 Capitol Hill Riot

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan investigation should determine why US lawmakers received no warning prior to the December 6 riot, even though Capitol Police were reportedly told by the FBI that Congress had become a target for protesters, House of Representatives Minority Leader Keven McCarthy told reporters on Thursday.

McCarthy cited media reports indicating that the FBI had an advance warning and notified Capitol Police prior to the riot, in which a group of then-President Donald Trump' supporters entered the US Capitol in a bid to protest lawmakers' certifying elector slates from US battleground states that Trump claims were invalid and robbed him of election victory. The chief of Capitol Police and the sergeant-at-arms in both the House and Senate resigned following the riot.

"I want to know why the Republican leader was not notified of that. Why was I not notified to make sure we were protected," McCarthy said.

Other security issues cited by McCarthy, included whether the National Guard was deployed soon enough during the melee and basic information such as which entrances are routinely protected.

"The only way you're going to be able to answer these questions is through a bipartisan commission," McCarthy said.

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US House Speaker to Discuss Trump Impeachment Timeline in 'Another Few Days'

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told reporters on Thursday that in the next few days she will hold consultations about when to submit the article impeachment against former President Donald Trump to the Senate for trial.

"We will be in another few days ... I will be talking with the managers [of impeachment chosen from the House members] as to when the Senate will be ready for the trial of the then President of the United States for his role in instigating an insurrection on the Capitol of the United States, on our democracy to undermine the will of the people," Pelosi said during a press briefing. Last week, the House impeached Trump for inciting insurrection after a group of his supporters entered the US Capitol on January 6 in an attempt to protest legislators certifying electoral slates from US states that Trump claims are invalid and robbed him of election victory. The Senate's subsequent role is to sit as a court of impeachment and vote to acquit or convict the former president.

"We had to wait for the Senate to be in session. They have now informed us they are ready to receive. The question is... how the trial will proceed. But we are ready," Pelosi said.

The noted further proceedings will happen soon, adding "we must do it."

The US Constitution requires a two-thirds Senate vote to convict Trump.

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Russian Ambassador to US Antonov Says Still No Contact With Biden Administration

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Thursday that the Russian Embassy has not yet had any contacts with the new administration of President Joe Biden.

"It's 11:30 a.m. now in Washington, DC, the Embassy has not yet had any contacts with the Biden administration," Antonov said in an interview with the Russia 1 TV Chanel.

Biden was sworn in and took office as the 46th US president on Wednesday.

Antonov told Sputnik earlier that Russian diplomats intend to establish regular contacts with the new US administration.

The Russian ambassador said the new administration should be given time to decide on foreign policy priorities and approaches, and its international course should be judged based on actions rather than pre-election rhetoric.

However, Antonov also said the possible meetings between Russian and US presidents and the two countries' top diplomats in 2021 will depend on a number of factors, including the normalization of the epidemiological situation, meetings agenda and the possibility of communication on the margins of multilateral events.

Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov said earlier in the week that Russian President Vladimir Putin has not yet planned contacts with Biden. Asked if Russia had already established contacts with Biden's team and was in talks on a potential Putin-Biden phone talks, Peskov said "not yet."

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Biden to Seek 5-Year New START Extension- Reports

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will seek a five-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) pact that caps nuclear arsenals of Russia and the United States, The Washington Post reported on Thursday citing two senior US officials.

The only nuclear arms control regime in effect between the two countries expires on February 5, but can be prolonged for another half a decade.

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US Climate Envoy Kerry Signals Rapid 'Phase Out' of Coal By Biden Administration

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US Envoy for Climate Change John Kerry outlined in a speech on Thursday a series of steps needed to reach net-zero carbon emissions, including the end of coal as a power source to generate electricity.

"Reaching net-zero global carbon emissions as early as 2050 will take a wholesale transformation of the global economy," Kerry said. "We know we need to: Phase out coal five times faster than we have been (based on the comparison with the trend from 2013-2018)." Kerry also sketched other steps that he said were needed to halt net increases in atmospheric carbon, including a 22-fold increase in electric vehicles and a six-fold rise in renewable energy. Kerry's remarks were prepared for a virtual meeting of Business 20 (B-20) - a group of private companies hosted by Italy to support climate policies of the Group of 20 nations. Shortly after Wednesday's inauguration, President Joe Biden signed an executive order re-enlisting the United States in the Paris Climate Accord, reversing the Trump administration's withdrawal from the 2015 agreement.

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Head of UN Peacekeeping Mission in CAR Asks for Substantial Increase in Troops

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - The number of peacekeepers serving in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) should be increased to support the mission's ability to deliver on its mandate, MINUSCA head Mankeur Ndiaye said on Thursday.

"We need a strategy to manage the mandate, a substantial increase of uniform troops and the mission," Ndiaye told the UN Security Council.

In less than a month, MINUSCA has lost seven peacekeepers since armed groups began their offensive against the CAR government of President Faustin-Archange Touadera.

Ndiaye said peacekeeping troops are currently deployed over extremely large areas and have limited ability to rapidly react and respond to attacks perpetrated by the Coalition of Patriots for Change and other armed groups.

Moreover, some areas have seen no MINUSCA presence for over a month since troops' withdrawal from there and have no state representation, Ndiaye also said.

"We need to increase our capacity in order to respond to this new threat, which is destabilizing the country even further," Ndiaye added.

The security situation in CAR has deteriorated after pre-election violent clashes between the forces backing Touadera and the supporters of his main rival and predecessor, Francois Bozize. Prior to the election, the CAR was rocked by clashes between the rebel groups supporting Bozize and Touadera's loyalists. The CPC, comprising several rebel groups backing Bozize went on with targeting the capital of Bangui later in January, further plunging the country into the security crisis, also worsened by attacks on UN peacekeepers.

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FBI Offers \$75,000 Reward for Information on Persons Placing Pipe Bombs in Washington

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The FBI said in a statement on Thursday that it has offered a new reward of up to \$75,000 for information on individuals who put pipe bombs during the January 6 incident at the US Capitol.

"ATF Washington and FBI WFO [Washington Field Office] offering a reward of up to \$75K for info about the person(s) responsible for the placement of suspected pipe bombs in [Washington] DC on January 6th," the statement said.

The FBI noted that at around 1:00 p.m. on January 6, multiple law enforcement agencies received reports of a suspected pipe bomb at the Republican National Committee headquarters

and 15 minutes later a second suspected pipe bomb was reported at the Democratic National Committee headquarters.

The FBI continues to call on people across the country to send information, photos and videos that can help the ongoing investigation, according to media reports.

On January 6, a group of supporters of former President Donald Trump stormed Capitol Hill to protest lawmakers certifying elector slates from battleground states Trump claims are invalid and robbed him of election victory. At least three people died in the incident, including a female Air Force veteran who was shot by police. The authorities have opened more than 170 cases in connection with the riot.

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Biden to Keep Christopher Wray as FBI Director - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden intends to keep FBI Director Christopher Wray in that position, CNBC reported on Thursday citing the White House official. Wray, who was appointed by former President Donald Trump, is serving a ten-year term and will likely remain in the current position, the report said.

White House spokesperson Jen Psaki declined to discuss the issue during her first press briefing on Wednesday.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Dip But Remain Near 5-Month High - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Some 900,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, a little less than the previous week but still near the five month high, US Labor Department said in a news release on Thursday.

"In the week ending January 16, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 900,000," the release said.

The Labor Department revised down claims in the previous week to January 9 to 926,000, from a previously published 965,000. That brought the latest week's claims down by 26,000, or 2.8 percent.

The filings in the previous week were the highest since the 1,006,000 claims received during the week ended August 22, putting the number at a near five-month high.

"The data is a bit better than last week's sharp spike higher and the prior month was revised lower, but 900,000 is still a large number," Greg Michalowski, analyst at FX Live.com, said on Thursday.

Continuing weekly claims, reported with a one-week lag but sometimes considered a better gauge of the labor market, slid to 5.05 million for the week ended January 16 from a previous

5.18 million. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, stood at 3.6 percent, unchanged from the previous week.

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US Methamphetamine Overdose Deaths Quadruple in 8-Year Period Ending in 2018 - Report

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - A quiet and relatively unnoticed epidemic of deaths from methamphetamine abuse hit the United States from 2011 to 2018, largely overshadowed by a parallel surge in opioid overdose fatalities that dominated headlines, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) said in a report on Thursday.

"While much attention is focused on the opioid crisis, a methamphetamine crisis has been quietly, but actively, gaining steam - particularly among American Indians and Alaska Natives, who are disproportionately affected by a number of health conditions," NIDA Director Nora Volkow said in a press release explaining the report.

Deaths involving methamphetamines rose from 1.8 to 10.1 per 100,000 men, and from 0.8 to 4.5 per 100,000 women. This represents a more than five-fold increase from 2011 to 2018, the release said.

American Indians and Alaska Natives were especially hard hit during the eight year period, with fatality rates rising from 4.5 to 20.9 per 100,000 people - more than twice the overall average, the release added.

The report is being published on Thursday in the American Medical Association (AMA) journal "Psychiatry," according to the release.

The AMA recently reported opioid-related deaths continued to increase during, and possibly as a result of, the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, particularly from illicitly manufactured fentanyl and fentanyl analogs.

In 2019, prior to the onset of the pandemic, the US authorities reported more than 50,000 opioid overdose deaths, despite a nationwide crackdown on legal prescriptions for opioid-containing drugs.

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"ATF Washington and FBI WFO [Washington Field Office] offering a reward of up to \$75K for info about the person(s) responsible for the placement of suspected pipe bombs in DC on January 6th," the Twitter statement said.

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Russia Expects to Have Constructive Dialogue With US on Korean Peninsula - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Russia expects to have a constructive dialogue with the new US administration on the Korean peninsula, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

The incoming US administration will review the entire approach and policy toward North Korea, President Joe Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said during his Senate confirmation hearing.

"Our diplomats are familiar with Kurt Campbell tapped for the position of regional coordinator for Asia policy in the National Security Council. We hope to have a constructive dialogue with him on strengthening peace and stability — on the Korean peninsula, among other things," Antonov said.

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New US Gov't Could Convince Kiev to Implement Minsk Accords - Russian Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The best thing Joe Biden's administration could do for the conflict in Ukraine would be to convince the team of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to start implementing Minsk agreements, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"The best thing the incoming administration could do on Ukraine is to convince Zelenskyy's team to finally start implementing Minsk agreements. We also expect new leadership of the State Department to highlight that Kiev's attacks on Minsk measures are counterproductive," the envoy said.

Minsk agreements suggest, among other things, determining the status of the two regions in eastern Ukraine, which have been locked in bitter conflict with Kiev since 2014.

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Russia Expects New US Gov't to Follow Through on Return to Iran Nuclear Deal - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Russia expects the administration of Joe Biden to keep campaign promises on Iran and, most importantly, on the return to the nuclear deal, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

Former President Donald Trump took the US out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), citing Tehran's lack of compliance. However, the other parties to the deal said they would remain compliant. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said earlier in the day that Iran would implement its commitments under the United States' resumed implementation of the nuclear accord.

"We expect the administration of Democrats to keep campaign promises on Iran. Above all, on the return to the JCPOA. We expect it to help resume political dialogue and de-escalate the situation in the Persian Gulf," the diplomat said.

The United States will reciprocate in kind to Iran's resumed compliance with the nuclear deal, but would seek a broader agreement to cover issues like its missile program and malign activities, the nominee for Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a Senate panel on Tuesday.

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RPT: REVIEW - Biden on Day 1 Takes 'Bold Action' to Dismantle Trump's Signature Policies
WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden shortly after being inaugurated signed a flurry of executive orders designed to reverse several of his predecessor's key environmental, security and immigration policies.

Washington was on virtual lockdown ahead of and during the inauguration festivities amid fears of violence stemming from the January 6 assault on the Capitol by supporters of then-US President Donald Trump. The protesters, after a fiery speech from Trump, had tried to prevent Congress from certifying Biden's victory. Trump was impeached last week for allegedly inciting the "insurrection" and the pending senate trial threatens to overshadow the beginning of Biden's term.

INAUGURATION UNDER HIGH ALERT

Some 25,000 National Guard soldiers were mobilized to the nation's capital to boost security during the inauguration. In addition, multilayered fences were erected and scores of metro stations, roads and bridges closed for what was the lowest attended inauguration in US history due to the pandemic and security fears from the Capitol riots.

Judy Grear, who traveled all the way from California's Santa Catalina island, told Sputnik she came to see history in the making but was disappointed with the harsh restrictions.

"It is really sad that it has to be all online and all virtual. It seems that there are so many things that are taken away because of this insurrection and riot," Grear said as she tried to catch a glimpse of Biden's motorcade from behind the backs of police on Wednesday.

Biden was sworn into office at around noon EST (17:00 GMT) in a ceremony administered by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts outside the US Capitol building. The 78-year-old Democratic Party veteran took the oath with his hand on top of a 127-year-old, five-inch-thick family Bible, with his wife Jill and son Hunter standing by his side. Biden's swearing-in came right after Kamala Harris took the oath as the country's first female vice president.

Bind in his inaugural address vowed to bring the country together in order to defeat the virus along with political extremism, white supremacy and domestic terrorism.

"We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal. We can do this," Biden said during the address.

In addition to fixing damage at home, the former Obama administration vice president said he also aims to repair US alliances and "engage with the world once again."

Biden and Harris then conducted a ceremonial review of troops before heading to Arlington Cemetery in Virginia, where the president laid a wreath at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

SWIFT, IMMEDIATE ACTION

As he made his way to the White House, the new president said "there is no time to waste" in order to tackle the crises the country faced.

"That's why today, I am heading to the Oval Office to get right to work delivering bold action," Biden said via Twitter.

And bold action he took. Biden signed fifteen executive orders on Wednesday tops amongst which called for halting construction of the border wall, rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement and World Health Organization, rescinding the Keystone XL pipeline permit, along with terminating the so-called Muslim travel ban.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement that he welcomes Biden's decision to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement and remains committed to cooperating to overcome the climate emergency and recover from the coronavirus pandemic. UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said Guterres also welcomed US "re-engagement" with the WHO and supporting the COVAX Facility, a global vaccine initiative.

"With vaccines being a critical tool in the battle against COVID-19, the United States joining and supporting the COVAX facility will give momentum to efforts to ensure equitable access to vaccines for all countries," Dujarric said in a statement on Wednesday.

The White House said US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci will participate in a WHO meeting on Thursday.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a statement said he was disappointed in Biden's decision to reject the permit for the construction of the 1,700-mile Keystone XL pipeline, which is designed to transfer oil from Alberta to the US state of Nebraska.

Other major orders included a covid mask mandate for federal workers and the launch of an initiative to address racial inequalities in government.

The White House said the president also submitted new immigration legislation to Congress, both houses of which are now controlled by Biden's Democratic Party after flipping the Senate in the 2020 election.

US-RUSSIA PROSPECTS

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik that while no contacts have yet been made with the new administration, Russian diplomats were familiar with many of Biden's nominees for top jobs.

The ambassador said he looks forward to beginning substantive talks with Biden's teams especially on renewing the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

"Russia is open for a substantive dialogue on the New START. There are still chances to reach this agreement before the treaty expires on February 5, 2021. The ball is in Washington's court, we are waiting for constructive proposals," Antonov said.

Antonov also said Russia would like to work with the US on issues such as rebuilding Syria and hopes Washington studies Moscow's idea to hold a summit of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

"It would be useful to find areas where Russia and the US could cooperate. For instance, on humanitarian aid, post-conflict rebuilding, de-mining, helping refugees and internally displaced persons return, and counterterrorism. We are ready for such cooperation - on condition that Syria's sovereignty is respected," the ambassador said.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki later in the evening told reporters there was nothing to announce yet in terms of a call between Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin. She said Biden's first telephone call with a foreign leader is scheduled for Friday with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Psaki said she expects Biden's decision on the Keystone pipeline to be one of the topics discussed.

TRUMP VOWS TO RETURN

Conspicuously absent from the inauguration ceremony was Trump, who left for his Mar-a-Lago golf club in Palm Beach on Wednesday morning. He became the first president to skip his successor's inauguration since 1879. Biden did say that Trump left him a "generous letter."

"What we've done has been amazing by any standard. We rebuilt the United States military, we created a new force, called the Space Force - that in itself would be a major achievement for a regular administration. We were not a regular administration," Trump told reporters.

Trump also wished the Biden administration "great luck and great success."

"I think they'll have great success, they have the foundation to do something, really spectacular," Trump said. "So, just a good bye. We love you. We will be back in some form... Have a good life, we will see you soon."