

01/22/21 Friday

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Trump's Second Impeachment Trial to Commence Week of February 8, Schumer Says by [Mary F.](#)

Former US president Donald Trump is facing impeachment for the second time for the "incitement of insurrection" following the deadly Capitol riots on January 6. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi will send the article of impeachment against Trump to the Senate on Monday. On Friday, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced on the Senate Floor that the Senate will begin Trump's impeachment trial the week of February 8.

"[Impeachment] presentations by the parties will commence the week of February the 8th," Schumer said.

The House of Representatives will deliver the article of impeachment to the Senate at 7 p.m. ET Monday, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi [said in a statement](#).

"It will be a full trial. It will be a fair trial," Schumer said. "But make no mistake: There will be a trial, and when that trial ends, senators will have to decide if they believe Donald John Trump incited the insurrection against the United States."

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell had proposed delaying the start of the trial to mid-February to allow Trump time more time to establish a defense team, [the Washington Post reported](#).

According to the Post, US President Joe Biden also supported the delay, stating that "the more time we have to get up and running to meet these crises, the better."

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](#).

On January 13, Trump was impeached by the House for allegedly inciting his loyalists to breach the Capitol building in Washington, DC, on January 6 to protest against the certification of the Electoral College, which would have confirmed Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election. The former president has denied the charges and said his remarks were "totally appropriate."

The US Department of Justice (DoJ) is currently working to bring sedition and conspiracy charges against some of the rioters who stormed the Capitol. Prosecutors have already charged more than 100 people involved in the insurrection.

[Impeachment Article Against Trump Heads to Senate: Here's What Happens Next](#)

Trump is the only president in US history to face impeachment twice. On December 18, 2019, Trump was impeached by the House for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress after a formal House probe claimed that he had solicited foreign interference in the 2020 presidential election. The Senate acquitted Trump of these charges in February 2020. Only one Republican then voted in favor of one article of impeachment.

Although Trump is no longer president, the Senate could still convict him and vote to ban him from ever running for office again. However, the conviction is unlikely to occur, since 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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'Lawless Practice': US Intelligence Analysts Use Smartphone Location Data Without Warrants - Report
by [Mary F.](#)

Data privacy involves the dissemination of information, the public expectation of privacy and the legal and political issues surrounding data protection. Although there is no single data protection legislation in the US, there are hundreds of federal and state laws in place to protect the data of US residents.

Analysts at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) have bought databases of US smartphone location data in recent years without a warrant, according to an unclassified memo [obtained by the New York Times](#).

According to the memo, written by officials for Oregon Senator Ron Wyden, DIA analysts have been keeping track of the movements of Americans over the past two and a half years. In addition, DIA analysts have searched US location data five times during the past two and a half years, the document revealed.

During a 2018 ruling called the Carpenter decision, the Supreme Court ruled that the US Constitution requires the government to obtain a warrant when requesting that phone companies turn over location data regarding their consumers.

However, there is a loophole in the privacy law since the government can obtain similar data from a broker without a warrant.

"DIA does not construe the Carpenter decision to require a judicial warrant endorsing purchase or use of commercially available data for intelligence purposes," the agency memo said.

Wyden has also stated that he plans to propose legislation, dubbed the Fourth Amendment is Not for Sale Act, to protect commercially available location data. The bill would bar governments from buying data from unregulated data brokers.

In a [Senate speech](#) this week, Wyden condemned scenarios "in which the government, instead of getting an order, just goes out and purchases the private records of Americans from these sleazy and unregulated commercial data brokers who are simply above the law."

In a statement to the [Hill](#), Ashley Gorski, senior staff attorney at the ACLU, revealed that the DIA memo shows that Congress needs to implement revised legislation.

"The government cannot simply buy our private data in order to bypass bedrock constitutional protections," Gorski told the Hill. "Congress must end this lawless practice and require the government to get a warrant for our location data, regardless of its source."

This is not the first time that government entities have been found to be purchasing data from data brokers.

In November, Vice News' Motherboard [revealed](#) that the US military was purchasing data from a Muslim prayer app through a third-party broker called X-Mode. In February, the Wall Street Journal [revealed](#) that the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement used commercial databases to track immigrants.

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PayPal Shuts Down Account of US Woman Who Flew Private Plane to Capitol Riot
by [Mary F.](#)

Real estate agent Jenna Ryan, 50, participated in the January 6 Capitol riot. One day before the riot, the Texas real estate agent took a private jet to DC to attend the rally. Ryan was arrested on January 15 for participating in the insurrection that left five people dead.

Paypal on Thursday removed the account of Jenna Ryan after she used the platform to raise \$1,000 for legal fees after she was arrested for her participation in the riots.

Ryan posted on Twitter Thursday stating that she is accepting donations on PayPal after it banned her from using their platform.

"I am accepting donations to pay legal fees and losses due to my arrest and charges by the FBI for protesting at the US Capitol. Thank you for your support. Any amount helps," Ryan wrote on Twitter, [the Business Insider reported](#). "All my computers were confiscated as well as my phone and my Maga hat."

Ryan's tweets appear to have been taken down since.

In a statement to CBS News, a PayPal spokesperson confirmed that Ryan's account has been closed down.

"PayPal has a policy to allow fundraising for legal defense purposes," the spokesperson told [CBS News](#). "PayPal thoroughly reviews accounts, and if we learn that funds are used for anything other than legal defense, the account will be subject to immediate closure. We can confirm that the account in question has been closed."

Also on Thursday, Ryan tweeted that she is a believer in the QAnon conspiracy theory, which claims that Trump is fighting against a deep state of pedophiles.

Authorities were able to identify Ryan as one of the rioters after she live-streamed herself storming into the Capitol while stating: "Life or death, it doesn't matter. Here we go."

According to a criminal complaint filed earlier this month, Ryan has been charged with "knowingly entering or remaining in any restricted building or grounds without lawful authority" and "disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds," [the Hill reported](#).

Earlier this month, FBI Director Christopher Wray said on Thursday that more than 100 arrests had been made in connection to the Capitol breach, [Politico reported](#). More arrests are expected as authorities continue to investigate the insurrection.

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US Border Police Ramp Up Migrant Youth Detention Center Construction on Last-Minute Trump Contract

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

On his first day in office, US President Joe Biden made sweeping changes to US immigration policies, but many programs from the Trump administration will continue even as new legislation is considered, including the construction of processing facilities that had previously aroused so much ire.

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) are planning new migrant youth detention facilities in southern Texas near the Mexico border. The federal law enforcement agency was handed a new contract in the final days of the Trump administration.

[Border Report reported](#) on Thursday that CBP officials had confirmed the construction of new soft-sided tents in Donna, Texas, a city a few miles north of the US-Mexico border.

“CBP is moving forward with plans for the mobilization of soft-side facilities (SSF) in Donna, Texas. A lease with the city of Donna was awarded on January 15, 2021 and the notice to proceed was signed on January 19, 2021,” CBP officials told the outlet. “Construction of the SSF should be completed in approximately 30 days.”

January 19 was the last full day of Donald Trump’s presidency. While Trump wasn’t the originator border detention facilities or the crackdown on migrants by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the central place given to their expansion in Trump’s nationalist rhetoric helped stir widespread awareness and anger at the practices. No subject aroused more fury than youth detention, especially when [forcibly separated](#) from their parents by ICE.

The officials added that “Since April, CBP has seen a steady increase of UACs [unaccompanied alien children] from the Western Hemisphere due to the worsening economic conditions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, CBP is constructing temporary soft-side facilities in Donna.”

A [CBP document](#) obtained by Border Report has information about costs redacted. However, it notes that the facility will support Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) in the nearby border crossing cities of Laredo and Brownsville.

“Services to be procured include maintaining the soft-sided structures, continuing to maintain necessary permits, required utilities, site plans, cabling and IT infrastructure, maintenance of critical spaces to include restrooms, hearing rooms, attorney and client rooms, breakrooms, and storage rooms, security infrastructure, heating, air conditioning, and ventilation, and cleaning and sanitization,” the CBP document notes.

Biden Rolling Back Trump Policy

In the hours after US President Joe Biden was inaugurated on Wednesday, he began the process of rolling back many of Trump’s controversial policies, issuing [executive orders](#) that included halting construction of the border wall on the US-Mexico border, ending the travel ban on several Muslim-majority nations, and bolstering the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which protects immigrants brought to the US as children from being deported. On Thursday, the Biden administration halted new enrollment in the MPP program, colloquially known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy, pending reform of the immigration system. Earlier in

the day, Biden sent the relevant legislation to Congress, although leading Senate Republicans [immediately shot down](#) the proposal.

The bill would provide an expedited path to citizenship for some immigrants, including “Dreamers,” as those protected by DACA are called, as well as certain farm workers and immigrants in the US under Temporary Protected Status, which covers some refugees. It would also replace the term “alien” with “noncitizen” in legal nomenclature.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of migrants already enrolled in the MPP program continue to wait in encampments across the border in Mexico, with [hearings reduced](#) to a trickle after the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

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Biden Administration to ‘Review’ Taliban Compliance With February 2020 Peace Deal
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As US President Joe Biden took office earlier this week, the Pakistani government urged him to abide by his predecessor’s peace deal with the Taliban that promises an end to the 20-year-long conflict that has killed, directly or indirectly, hundreds of thousands of people. The newly minted Biden administration has said it will review the prior Trump administration’s peace deal with the Taliban militant group to assess whether the Taliban is holding to the terms of the February 2020 agreement.

National Security [Council spokesperson](#) Emily Horne said on Friday that during a phone call between US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his Afghan counterpart, Hamdullah Mohib, Sullivan “made clear the United States’ intention to review the February 2020 US-Taliban agreement, including to assess whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders.”

The deal, agreed upon after months of negotiations in Doha, Qatar, was signed between the US and the Taliban and did not include the US-backed Afghan government in Kabul. It stipulated that if the Taliban ceased its attacks on US forces and pledged to renounce terrorism, the US would steadily withdraw its roughly 13,000 troops from the country.

The US invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 to overthrow the Taliban in retaliation for the group having provided a safe harbor for the al-Qaeda terrorist organization, which had recently killed several thousand Americans in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. While the Taliban was ousted, it has remained a powerful force in the countryside, waging a guerilla campaign against US and Afghan government forces ever since.

Last week, the [Pentagon announced](#) those troop levels were now at just 2,500 and that all remaining US troops are expected to leave the Central Asian country by May. However, as the Taliban and Kabul government have yet to reach an accord, military exchanges have continued and the US has performed several airstrikes that have hit Taliban positions, prompting [outcry from the Taliban](#).

Earlier this month, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid [told Sputnik](#) that the group considers the strikes to be in violation of the Doha agreement and that “if the operation continues in violation and in an intentional manner, of course, we will be forced to react, and this is a provocative act.”

Negotiations between the Taliban and the Kabul government, which the Taliban regards as a puppet of Washington, began in September but have been slow-going. Only in December did they [reach an accord](#) on how to begin the peace talks themselves, [which began](#) in early January.

Biden's Approach to Afghanistan

In an [interview with CBS](#) on the eve of the February 2020 peace deal's signing, Biden noted his long-standing opposition to a large US presence in Afghanistan, saying he wanted a “smaller footprint” of “several thousand people to make sure that we have a place from which we can operate” in order to stop Al-Qaeda or Daesh from re-establishing a foothold to attack the United States.

However, he indicated he believes he would hold “zero responsibility” if, after a US withdrawal, the Taliban were to return to power.

On Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters Biden had directed US intelligence agencies to look into reports that Russian agents had been offering the [Taliban bounties](#) to kill US soldiers in the country. The story emerged in the New York Times last year, which gave vague citations for the claims, and US intelligence leaders [roundly dismissed](#) the story as rumors and unreliable intelligence they did not take seriously. In addition, both Russia and the Taliban have [denied the accusations](#).

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US Will Work Closely With Partners in Region to Deter North Korea, White House Says
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US President Joe Biden has indicated that like former US President Donald Trump, he sees sanctions as a useful foreign policy tool. However, he has said he would demand Pyongyang agree beforehand to give up some of its nuclear forces before he would meet for a peace summit.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday that the Biden administration would work closely with regional partners to “deter” the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

“As we have historically, the United States will work closely with partners in the region to determine on path forward and work together on deterrence,” Psaki said. “We obviously have a vital interest in deterring North Korea.”

Those partners include Japan and the Republic of Korea, also called South Korea.

Biden is likely to continue using Trump's favored tool of diplomatic coercion - economic sanctions - against US adversaries, including the DPRK, according to a [Reuters report](#) last month.

Biden Approach Differs From Trump

During the 2020 presidential election campaign, Biden sought to distance himself from then-US President Donald Trump's rapprochement with DPRK leader Kim Jong Un, whom Trump met for several summits aimed at convincing the socialist state to give up its nuclear weapons program in exchange for lowering some of [those sanctions](#). In the end, Trump was unwilling to give some sanctions relief in exchange for demolition of some nuclear test facilities, and the talks fell apart. During a [televised debate](#) with Trump in October 2020, Biden compared Kim to German fascist dictator Adolf Hitler. He said he would only agree to meet if Kim agreed beforehand to reduce his country's nuclear arsenal. The country tested its first nuclear device in 2006 and is believed to have less than 40 nuclear warheads. It is not known if they have sufficiently miniaturized any of those warheads to fit them on an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

Previously, in November 2019, [Biden sharply criticized](#) Trump's policy after the DPRK tested two short-range missiles, calling the policy "a string of spectacular diplomatic failures" and attacking Kim as a "murderous dictator." He said Trump was wrong to treat Kim as an equal at the summits in Hanoi, Vietnam, and in Singapore.

In response, the DPRK's Ministry of Foreign Affairs called Biden "bereft of elementary quality as a human being" and accused him of being "greedy for power" in a [scathing statement](#) published by the state-owned Korea Central News Agency (KCNA).

"Rabid dogs like Biden can hurt lots of people if they are allowed to run out of control. They must be beaten to death with a stick, before it is too late," the ministry statement added. "Doing so will be beneficial also for the US."

An Armed Standoff

At a [military parade](#) in the capital of Pyongyang last week, the Korean People's Army showed off its vast array of missiles, including a submarine-launched ballistic missile previously unknown to Western observers. Another [large ICBM](#) appeared in an October 2020 parade. However, no test of such a rocket has been performed by the DPRK since it adopted a unilateral testing freeze in 2017.

The US remains technically at war with the DPRK, as the 1950-53 Korean War only ended in a ceasefire, not a permanent peace treaty. The war killed an estimated three million people, the vast majority of them Koreans. The ceasefire established a demilitarized zone separating North and South Korea, and the US has maintained a garrison of forces in the South to deter a potential invasion by the North.

In 2018, the two Koreas signed an end-of-war declaration as part of their own historic rapprochement, but further moves toward peace fell apart amid US objections, and relations have considerably cooled between Seoul and Pyongyang. However, late last year, South Korean President Moon Jae In, who signed the 2018 deal with Kim, pressured the United Nations and the United States to [help bring an end](#) to the 70-year-long conflict with their own end-of-war declaration.

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Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons Enters Force, But No Nuclear-Armed Power Signed It

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Biden administration is expected to review some of the costly nuclear weapons modernization programs begun under the Trump administration, which include new missiles, bombs, warheads, bombers, and submarines.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons officially entered force on Friday, making it illegal for any country to possess nuclear armaments. However, none of the nine countries known to have nuclear weapons have agreed to the treaty.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the treaty in July 2017, with more than 120 nations approving it. However, it could only enter force after 50 nations agreed to sign it - a milestone reached in October 2020, triggering the 90-day countdown to implementation.

At the time, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) [nonprofit claimed](#) that “with the treaty’s entry into force, we can call nuclear weapons what they are: prohibited weapons of mass destruction, just like chemical weapons and biological weapons.”

The [treaty requires](#) that all countries party to it must “never under any circumstances ... develop, test, produce, manufacture, otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices,” as well as banning their proliferation.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres praised the treaty, saying in a video posted on social media on Friday that “the elimination of nuclear weapons remains the highest disarmament priority of the United Nations. The Secretary-General calls on all States to work together to realize this ambition to advance common security and collective safety.”

“Nuclear weapons pose growing dangers and the world needs urgent action to ensure their elimination and prevent the catastrophic human and environmental consequences any use would cause,” he said.

However, not [a single country known](#) to possess nuclear weapons has signed the treaty. Those nations are the United States, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, France, People’s Republic of China, India, Pakistan, Israel, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

Further, not a single member of the NATO alliance, of which several nuclear states are members, has signed it.

In a strange twist, the only country to have actually been the target of a nuclear attack, Japan, also opposed the treaty as unworkable, although Tokyo has also renounced the use of such weapons. In the final days of the Second World War, the US dropped [two nuclear bombs](#) on Japanese cities - one on Hiroshima and a second on Nagasaki - annihilating them and killing more than 150,000 people.

The new administration of US President Joe Biden has shown no indication of a change in the course of US policy toward the treaty. However, on Friday, the White House confirmed the US has joined Russia in seeking [a five-year extension](#) to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), a bilateral weapons-limiting agreement that is due to expire in just days.

Reports have also emerged that the Biden transition team has [secretly been engaged](#) in talks with the Iranian government for weeks to find a path to returning to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a 2015 deal by which the international community lowered sanctions against Iran in exchange for it giving up its nuclear weapons program. Trump claimed Iran had violated the deal and he unilaterally withdrew from it, bringing back sanctions against Iran even

though no other signatory to the agreement found evidence to support Trump's claims. Tehran denies it seeks a nuclear weapon.

Biden is also expected to review many of the [nuclear modernization](#) programs begun by Trump, including new intercontinental ballistic missiles, a nuclear-tipped cruise missile, a new submarine class, and updates to several nuclear bombs and warheads. [Foreign policy thinkers](#) have also pressured Biden's team to issue a new Nuclear Posture Review to assess "how the Trump administration's internal nuclear policy decisions have negatively affected possible initiatives to reduce nuclear risks and address any potential problems immediately," as an op-ed in [Defense News](#) put it. The most recently policy review was issued in 2018.

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Tennessee Planned Parenthood Clinic Attacked With Shotgun on Anniversary of Abortion Legality Ruling

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Clinics that provide abortion services have often been targets of pro-life activists, though they often provide other medical aid, including screening for serious diseases.

A Planned Parenthood clinic in Knoxville, Tennessee, was attacked Friday morning by someone with a shotgun. According to the nonprofit family planning organization, a security camera captured the attack, which damaged the building's front and interior but did not injure anyone. Knoxville Police Department spokesman Scott Erland told the [Knoxville News Sentinel](#) that a witness had also seen a man holding a shotgun inside a dark-colored car and that "Officers observed that the front glass door had been shot out, while small bullet holes were also found throughout the back of the front reception area."

However, police remain on the hunt for the attacker.

The attack occurred on the 48th anniversary of the US Supreme Court's 1973 decision in the Roe v. Wade case, which established the framework for legal abortions in the United States. "We believe it is no coincidence that this act occurred on the Roe v. Wade anniversary," Ashley Coffield, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood of Tennessee and North Mississippi, said in a press release. "Planned Parenthood, along with our allies and other health care providers, have long known the violent consequences of inflammatory, hateful rhetoric."

Planned Parenthood provides a number of services related to reproductive health including abortions, vasectomies, screening for sexually transmitted diseases and for various types of cancer, and sex education classes. Because they provide abortion services, their clinics have often been sites of protest and targets of violence, including a wave of shootings and bombings, by anti-abortion activists.

Earlier on Friday, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee criticized Vice President Kamala Harris for her tweet about Roe v. Wade, saying on Twitter that "abortion isn't healthcare" and posting a donation link to an anti-abortion group.

In response, Francie Hunt, executive director of Tennessee Advocates for Planned Parenthood, called on Lee to "turn the volume down on his rhetoric," saying that "Political violence is a real danger in this country," according to [The Tennesseean](#).

In July, Lee signed into law a controversial bill that bans abortions after a purported "heartbeat" can be detected, which can happen as early as six weeks - often before the mother even knows she is pregnant. However, a federal court has [blocked its implementation](#) and it has yet to take effect. Similar laws have been passed in nearly a dozen US states.

[According to LiveScience](#), the "heartbeat" in question is not a true heartbeat, but a detectable firing of electrical signals from a group of cells that will eventually develop into the "pacemaker" part of the heart.

Biden's Stance on Abortion & Reproductive Rights

US President Joe Biden, who was sworn in on Wednesday, is [reportedly planning](#) to reverse several Donald Trump-era anti-abortion policies, including a ban on US federal funds going to non-governmental groups that provide abortion services - the so-called "Mexico City Policy" that Democratic presidents have removed and Republican presidents have revived since it was created in 1984.

He will also reportedly order a review of Trump's expansion of similar restrictions added to the Title X family planning program that forced [Planned Parenthood](#) to pull out or give up performing abortions.

When he was a senator, however, Biden supported the Hyde Amendment, saying that faithful Americans should not have to fund abortions that are contrary to their religious views. The Hyde Amendment is a provision barring federal funding for abortions if they are not necessary for the sake of a woman's life, or in cases of rape. [Democrats have argued](#) that it is a "discriminatory policy," especially harmful for low-income women.

Senior Democrats opposing the Hyde Amendment have [triggered debates](#) among religious representatives about their views, like those of Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who identify as Catholic but often push for policies that contradict religious dogmas.

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Amazon Files Motion to Halt Union Election Over Mail-in Votes by [Evan Craighead](#)

Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama, warehouse is slated to begin issuing mail-in ballots on February 8 for an election that would put it closer to becoming the first Amazon location to join the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). Amazon has asserted that it wishes to educate its workers on "the facts of joining a union."

[Documents filed](#) with the National Labor Relations Board Thursday show Amazon has requested the US labor board to intervene and halt an upcoming mail-in vote on unionization from proceeding.

According to the January 21 filing for the stay, there have been several "gaps" in NLRB precedent amid the planning of the election, including "Acting Regional Director errors, and

missed opportunities for mail-ballot improvements, all with the rights of thousands of employee-voters at stake."

"It cries out for a stay, so that the Board can set election matters back on course before ballots are mailed," lawyers wrote. Otherwise, this case threatens to tie up the Board (and a federal court) for years, instead of resulting in a clear and cogent resolution of the issues up front."

The vote, scheduled for February 8, would make the Bessemer fulfillment center - which employs around 6,200 workers - the first location to be part of the RWDSU. Amazon insists that the vote should be held in person, rather than by mail.

In addition to the "Motion to Stay an Election" request, Amazon has also filed for a "review of the acting regional director's decision and direction of election."

Sen. Bernie Sanders (D-VT) has expressed vocal support for the unionization of workers. Hours before Amazon's Thursday filings, Sanders argued via Twitter that the American multinational technology company "doesn't want its workers to form a union" because workers would benefit from higher wages, better benefits and more "control over their lives."

Amazon has defended its actions, [arguing it](#) wants to educate employees on "the facts of joining a union." The website 'doitwithoutdues.com' has been cited by the company and warns Bessemer facility employees against paying union dues, asking, "why pay almost \$500 in dues? We've got you covered* with high wages, health care, vision, and dental benefits."

"We will continue to insist on measures for a fair election," the company said in a statement provided to Reuters.

The push to form a union and obtain better job security comes as many non-unionized workers are being laid off by companies losing money, closing and going bankrupt amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier this week, it [was revealed](#) that grocery delivery service Instacart plans to lay off 1,877 employees, despite the company getting increased business during the government-imposed lockdowns.

An Instacart spokesperson told CBS News that the layoff come as a result of grocery stores wanting their own employees to do the work they were previously enlisting delivery company employees to cover.

"As a result of some grocers transitioning to a Partner Pick model, we'll be winding down our in-store operations at select retailer locations over the coming months," the spokesperson claimed.

However, a Kroger spokesperson denied that its company - which also owns stores like Harris Teeter and Ralph's - played any role "in Instacart's decision to suspend its in-store operations model." The spokesperson then encouraged those seeking employment to apply to any of their several chains.

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'It's Not Getting Better': Biden Says US Economic Crisis Is Deepening
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US President Joe Biden's economic relief plan rollout comes a day after the US Department of Labor announced some 900,000 additional Americans filed for unemployment insurance during the week ending in January 16.

While [delivering remarks](#) on the economy Thursday, Biden presented a grim outlook by asserting the US is currently facing uncommon economic hurdles that will require federal intervention within the next several months.

"We remain in a once-in-a-century public health crisis that has led to the most unequal job and economic crisis in modern history. And the crisis is only deepening," he remarked during an address held on his second full day in office.

The US president also stressed that it is necessary that Congress looks at his \$1.9 trillion COVID relief bill, which includes the third round of direct 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.

"We cannot, will not, let people go hungry. We cannot let people be evicted because of nothing they did themselves," he declared. "We cannot watch people lose their jobs and we have to act. We have to act now. It's not just to meet the moral obligation to treat our fellow Americans with the dignity and respect they deserve."

Biden went on to sign two executive orders, one of which seeks to increase food aid and assist unemployed Americans. The other order lays the groundwork for federal workers and contractors to get a \$15-an-hour minimum wage.

"Today, I am signing an executive order that directs the whole of government effort to help millions of Americans who are badly hurting, requires all federal agencies to do what they can do to do to provide relief to families, small businesses and communities. In the days ahead I expect agencies to act," Biden said during a signing ceremony on Friday.

President specifically asked the Department of Agriculture to look for immediate measures "to make it easier for the hardest-hit families to enroll and claim more generous benefits in the critical food and nutrition assistance area."

The US president's executive intervention comes a day after [new figures](#) from the DoL showed US jobless claims sitting at 900,000 Mark Zandi, a chief economist for Moody's Analytics, [says claims](#) would be somewhere around 200,000 in a "typical economy."

The still-high unemployment rate comes amid the US' steadily growing COVID-19 death toll.

"A lot of America is hurting. The virus is surging. We are [at] 400,000 dead [and] expected to reach over 600,000," Biden highlighted Friday.

Overall, the US has logged more than 24.7 million cases of the novel coronavirus and at least 412,780 deaths related to the contagious disease, according to the Johns Hopkins University [COVID-19 dashboard](#).

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Lending Hands: Big Tech Pulls Strings as US Pushes Mass COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US has experienced a multitude of setbacks that range from a stunted economy, struggling public health infrastructure and a problematic vaccine delivery system. To date, the US has documented over 24.5 million COVID-19 cases as the deadly virus has claimed the lives of more than 400,000 Americans.

At present, the US Food and Drug Administration has only issued two emergency use of authorizations for COVID-19 vaccines produced by companies [Pfizer-BioNTech](#) and [Moderna](#), and has managed to distribute the candidates' two-part doses under the Trump administration-launched [Operation Warp Speed](#).

Launched during the height of the deadly outbreak last year, the Trump administration's pet project was touted as the next big accomplishment by the US; however, the program has not been without [its challenges](#). At the time, government officials stated 20 million Americans could be vaccinated by the end of 2020, with another 30 million receiving their first dose by the end of January 2021, but ultimately neither of those goals were made on time despite the multibillion-dollar effort.

Newly sworn-in US President Joe Biden [has vowed](#) to push for the vaccination of 100 million Americans within his first 100 days in office.

The US' ongoing distribution effort has been largely supported by a variety of government agencies and private companies such as Amazon and computer software company Oracle, among other entities.

Amazon Extends Help to Biden Mission, But Raises Questions

Prominent e-commerce firm Amazon recently joined the growing group of big tech companies to throw their support behind the US' vaccine rollout plans after it was revealed that Dave Clark, the incoming chief executive officer of Amazon's retail unit, offered a helping hand in Biden's 100-day mission.

In a [Wednesday letter](#) to Biden, Clark congratulated both the president and Vice President Kamala Harris on their new posts, before informing the pair that the company was willing to provide its operational reach to "make a meaningful impact" on the administration's vaccination push.

"We have an agreement in place with a licensed third-party occupational health care provider to administer vaccines on-site at our Amazon facilities. We are prepared to move quickly once vaccines are available," Clark wrote, referring to the company's own effort to provide vaccines to its 800,000-plus workforce. "Additionally, we are prepared to leverage our operations, information technology, and communications capabilities and expertise to assist your administration's vaccination efforts."

It's unclear if the Biden administration has responded to the offer and will be tapping on the tech giant's logistical resources to help in the vaccine distribution program.

Acknowledging Amazon's vast delivery abilities, Charles Elson, a professor of corporate governance at the University of Delaware, says that while the e-commerce site has an "excellent supply chain" it's uncertain how well its efforts may go down.

"Amazon delivery van is not built to move vaccines - it sends pants, shoes, puzzles, but not the vaccine," he said, highlighting the distribution of the approved vaccines are extremely complex as doses must be kept in temperatures far below freezing and require special containers for transport.

"The offer is certainly generous and helpful," Elson said, but, "the question is, why wasn't it [made] earlier?"

Incidentally, in response to reports of Amazon's letter, two senior Trump administration officials were quick to bash the development, [telling Fox Business](#) that Amazon officials had never made such a direct offer to the former commander-in-chief, although the company had maintained communication with the CDC on the matter.

Asked about the differing approaches to the two US administrations, an Amazon spokesperson did not give an explanation to the outlet, leaving the subject open to widespread speculation on whether politics truly did play a role in its decision to stand by and not use its services to aid in the US' vaccine distribution plans.

Richie Greenberg, political commentator and business adviser who made a bid in 2018 to become San Francisco's next mayor, says that Amazon's sudden shift raises "more questions than it answers."

"Even more of a concern is why hasn't Amazon made this offer in the past few months, since the rollout of vaccines? We should hope the reason is not political," he remarked. "How many lives have been lost due to Amazon withholding assistance until a new president took office?" However, aside from the offer itself, Greenberg underscores it's also unclear if Amazon is "going to make a difference" when you consider just how few vaccines have been administered and how many doses are still sitting in storage.

"This is a major issue," he stressed. "In states such as California, thousands of doses remain in storage, far beyond what have been injected. It's not due to manufacturing and distribution, but a confusing and ineffective city protocol."

The [latest data](#) from the US' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate about 36 million vaccine doses have been distributed, while just 16.5 million doses have been administered. Only 2.1 million Americans have received the two required doses of either of the vaccines.

Microsoft, Oracle & Salesforce to Develop Vaccine Passport

Anticipating a measure by airlines, companies and governments around the world to prove that individuals have been inoculated against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, a coalition of health and big tech companies have joined forces to create a digital immunization passport.

The program, known as the [Vaccination Credential Initiative \(VCI\)](#), includes the participation of tech companies Microsoft, Salesforce and Oracle in addition to health care agencies Mayo Clinic, and Change Healthcare.

"VCI's vision is to empower individuals to obtain an encrypted digital copy of their immunization credentials to store in a digital wallet of their choice," the coalition explained in a [recent release](#). For individuals who do not have a smartphone, they will be given paper copies that include a QR code containing similarly verifiable credentials.

The group also intends to develop a new standard for confirming whether an individual has or has not been inoculated against the deadly virus. Paul Meyer, CEO of the Commons Project Foundation - a coalition participant, said in a statement accompanying the release that the goal for the initiative is to provide helpful tools allowing for the safe "return to travel, work, school, and life."

However, it's presently uncertain how soon the companies will be able to deliver on their initiative, which was only announced just last week.

For its part, Oracle [also donated](#) a national electronic health record database and a management application to the US government so that it could manage the distribution of the approved COVID-19 vaccines. Similarly, Microsoft followed suit with the deployment of its own [management systems](#).

Salesforce Helps Deliver 2 Billion Vaccines, Provides Management Platform

Prior to joining the VCI project, software company [Salesforce announced](#) in mid-December that it would be partnering with global health firm Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance as part of a global push to distribute approximately 2 billion COVID-19 vaccines to 190 countries by the end of 2021. Salesforce's contribution to the measure will see the software company use its cloud technology to power the alliance's country engagement platform that will allow nations to "communicate and share information, such as vaccine requirements and access reports."

"The partnership will give people worldwide, especially in the poorest countries, access to vaccines that help protect them from COVID-19 and stem the continuing catastrophic social and economic disruption the pandemic has already left in its wake," Dr. Seth Berkley, Gavi CEO said in a statement issued with the release.

Additionally, Salesforce has also launched [Work.com for Vaccines](#), a vaccine management solution helping governments and health care organizations efficiently manage vaccine programs at a larger scale. Specifically, the site allows officials to better coordinate vaccine appointments, registration, inventory and even outreach initiatives.

Google Shells Out Benjamins, Helps Bolster Vaccine Intel

Search engine giant Google has also chipped in on the massive vaccine rollout effort by using its cloud services to help with vaccine intelligence and by donating millions in support of relief efforts and government organizations.

The company noted in [a blogpost](#) that it has used its Google Cloud service to help US government agencies "solve critical citizen service delivery issues," and more specifically, build an improved platform to expand telehealth capabilities across the nation.

"We're also helping governments build apps that can help screen patients remotely and aid in contact tracing to help stop the spread of the disease," Thomas Kurian, CEO of Google Cloud, noted before explaining that the search engine has also worked to create a national response platform to assist hospitals and hurting communities.

Google has also introduced its [Healthcare Consent Management API](#) to give health professionals a manner in which to better "manage individuals' consent of their health data."

The company notes that the program offers an assurance to officials that makes it easier to meet existing and emerging consent frameworks.

In an effort to combat misinformation surrounding COVID-19 vaccines, Google also launched [knowledge panels](#) in December to provide viewers with accurate information. More recently, the company offered up [\\$3 million](#) to support fact-checking initiatives to counter vaccine misinformation online.

Social Media Clamps Down on Vaccine Misinformation

Aside from Google's efforts, three of the largest social networks - Facebook, YouTube and Twitter - announced [last November](#) that they would work with fact-checkers, governments and researchers to tackle vaccine misinformation head-on.

The initiative, started by British fact-checking charity [Full Fact](#), aims to establish a set of standards to combat misinformation as well as crafting rules that would ultimately hold organizations responsible for failing to keep up their end of the bargain.

Other efforts taken on by social media giants include labeling COVID-19-related posts with a link to an official health site, such as the CDC, regardless of whether an official agency has been tagged in the post.

Early on in the pandemic, governing agencies, such as the [European Union](#), called on US tech giants to produce monthly reports that included "detailed data" on how they were specifically tackling misinformation. The prime targets of the push were Google, Facebook and Twitter.

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Texas Files Lawsuit Against Biden Administration to Block Deportation Freeze
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, reports surfaced detailing that Texas was intending to sue the Biden administration over its move to halt the majority of deportations for the duration of the new president's first 100 days in office.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton filed a complaint and a motion on Friday for a restraining order to immediately block the Biden administration's move to enact a temporary freeze on deportations.

The measure, which was filed in the US District Court for the Southern District of Texas, accuses the new US administration of violating the "US Constitution, federal immigration and administrative law, and a contractual agreement between Texas and [the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)]."

"On its first day in office, the Biden Administration cast aside congressionally enacted immigration laws and suspended the removal of illegal aliens whose removal is compelled by those very laws," reads [the filing](#). "In doing so, it ignored basic constitutional principles and violated its written pledge to work cooperatively with the State of Texas to address shared immigration enforcement concerns."

"This unlawful reversal will cause Texas immediate and irreparable harm if it is not enjoined," the legal complaint noted. It also indicated that "without emergency relief, Texas faces irreparable harm from having to provide costly educational, social, welfare, healthcare, and other services to illegal aliens who remain in Texas because defendants have ceased removing them."

It's unlikely that the legal move will have any success in reinstating deportations across the board, according to immigration lawyer Leon Fresco, who [explained to Axios](#) that a judge isn't able to force US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials to remove an individual. The contractual agreement cited by Paxton was signed on December 31 by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and Ken Cuccinelli, the former acting deputy secretary of the DHS. The deal requires DHS to consult with Texas officials and give them a 180-day written notice of any proposed actions that may alter the Lone Star State's illegal immigration protocols.

Additionally, the agreement notes that a failure to comply with the terms would prompt parties to file an injunction. A possible termination of the pact would require another 180-day notice. Paxton's filing came hours after he issued a warning letter to acting DHS Secretary David Pekoske on Thursday night, stating that the administration's moratorium was an "[unlawful pause](#)" on deportations.

[The order](#), which went into effect on Friday, stipulates that the temporary pause would "allow DHS to ensure that its resources are dedicated to responding to the most pressing challenges that the United States faces." The order effectively halts the deportation of any noncitizen, except those who pose a danger to national security, were not physically present in the US before November 2020 or who have voluntarily agreed to leave the country.

In fiscal year 2020, the ICE agency detained [over 450,000](#) individuals who were found illegally crossing the US' southern border with Mexico; however, when it came to deportations, the agency removed more than [185,000 persons](#).

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CDC: Less Than 1% of Those Who Received Moderna Vaccine Had Severe Reactions
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since the approval of both the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines, multiple reports have emerged detailing cases in which individuals underwent a series of mild reactions, while others suffered more serious effects such as anaphylaxis, a life-threatening, multisystem reaction that causes difficulty breathing.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued an [updated report](#) on Friday that indicated allergic reactions to Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine were few, with cases involving severe allergies being quite rare.

With over 4 million initial doses of the Moderna vaccine having been administered between December 21 and January 10, new data published by the health agency states only 1,266 (0.03%) adverse events were disclosed to the CDC's reporting system during that time period, with 108 of the cases being referred for additional investigation after officials identified a severe reaction.

However, in terms of those who have experienced anaphylaxis, the CDC reported cases were much more uncommon, and only occurred at a rate of 2.5 cases per 1 million shots administered.

All 10 individuals who were documented as experiencing anaphylaxis were women who had a median age of 47 years. Nine of the women began experiencing severe symptoms within 15 minutes of receiving their first Moderna shot, whereas one person had onset after 30 minutes. Of the small group, four were treated at an emergency room and six were hospitalized, four of whom had to be intubated. "No deaths from anaphylaxis were reported after receipt of Moderna COVID-19 vaccine," the report highlights, adding that nine of the individuals had a history of allergic reactions.

Among the eight women who had follow-up information available, all were documented as having recovered and discharged. CDC officials speculate more women are reporting adverse reactions on account of a higher amount of women subjecting themselves to the vaccination. The report notes that 61% of the Moderna doses were administered to women compared to only 36% of men.

Compared to findings of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, an [earlier analysis](#) determined the incidence rate of anaphylaxis after receiving the first Pfizer dose was at 11.1 cases per 1 million doses administered.

Last month, at about the same time that the US National Institutes of Health announced it would be preparing to launch an analysis into the anaphylaxis reaction tied to the Pfizer vaccine, some researchers were speculating that the reaction could be prompted by [polyethylene glycol \(PEG\)](#), a medicinal compound that is also present in the Moderna drug.

The Friday disclosure, released as part of the CDC's weekly Morbidity and Mortality report, came one day after the agency also issued a guidance that cleared mixing Pfizer and Moderna shots under "[exceptional situations](#)." Although both vaccines share many similarities, they have differing instructions that require them be taken either 21 or 28 days apart.

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Nearly 200 National Guard Troops Deployed to Washington DC Contract COVID-19
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Ahead of Inauguration Day, thousands of National Guard troops were deployed to Washington, DC, in light of the deadly January 6 Capitol riot and threats that Trump loyalists were planning to stage nationwide armed protests at government buildings, including at the US Capitol.

Close to 200 National Guards troops who were ordered to the nation's capital to provide additional security at inaugural festivities have reportedly returned positive COVID-19 tests, prompting fears that additional members are likely to become infected due to cramped working quarters.

Citing defense officials with knowledge of the development, the [Wall Street Journal reported](#) Friday that troops had been screened for COVID-19 prior to their deployment; however, unless it was required under their unit's screening process, not all individuals were tested for SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes COVID-19.

The potential super spreader incident was compounded when deployed guard members were instructed to work and take breaks in tight quarters - the complete opposite of social distancing guidelines imposed by government agencies.

[Politico reported](#) that the situation worsened even more on Thursday, when troops were told to vacate the Capitol grounds and relocate to a nearby parking garage. The outlet noted that one 5,000-strong National Guard unit was directed to a garage that was fitted with only one bathroom.

Photos from the parking garage show dozens of troops huddling in corners and opting out of wearing masks, another preventative measure health professionals have urged individuals to adhere to in order to curb the spread of the virus.

Reports of troops being told to vacate the congressional building quickly drew outrage from lawmakers, who have since called for an investigation into the development. At present, a probe has been undertaken by the Senate Rules Committee.

"Ideally, these guys should all be in hotels. When they're taking rest time, they should be taking it outside the campus with an ability to be separated and socially distanced," Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) told Politico, noting that officials needed to determine "what went wrong" that prompted troops to move into the parking garage.

Earlier reports had suggested the relocation order was given by the Capitol Police, however, acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman issued [a statement](#) Friday denying the force played a role in the incident.

More than 25,000 National Guard members from all 50 states were directed to Washington, DC, amid heightened security concerns following the Capitol insurrection. With some members diagnosed with asymptomatic cases, officials have grown concerned that the deployment could prompt a spreader event as troops return to their home base and as members stay on indefinitely.

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'Window of Opportunity': Iran's Zarif Urges Biden Administration to Rejoin 2015 Nuclear Deal by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Under the Trump administration, relations between the US and Iran quickly deteriorated and tensions reached new heights following the US' exit from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), imposition of a slew of designations and sanctions on Iranian officials and entities, and the killing of General Qasem Soleimani.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif urged newly sworn-in US President Joe Biden on Friday to "choose a better path" than his predecessor and return the Land of the Free to the 2015 nuclear deal before the opportunity disappears for the administration.

Zarif urged in an [opinion piece](#) published in Foreign Affairs magazine that if the US were to rejoin the thoroughly negotiated agreement, "Iran will likewise return to full implementation of our commitments under the nuclear deal." However, the official went on to warn that "if Washington instead insists on extracting concessions, then this opportunity will be lost."

"Iran has [significantly increased](#) its nuclear capabilities since May 2019 - but it has done so in full conformity with paragraph 36 of the nuclear agreement, which allows Iran to 'cease performing its commitments' under the deal should another signatory stop performing its own," reads the op-ed.

Zarif further states it is essential that the Biden administration "muster the genuine political will in Washington to demonstrate that the United States is ready to be a real partner in collective efforts."

According to the official, required steps to salvage the US' role as a signatory of the 2015 deal include "unconditionally removing" all sanctions imposed by the Trump administration and those that were re-imposed when former US President Donald Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 after alleging the terms were violated, and that the deal was fatally flawed.

Participants of the still active agreement include China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the European Union.

"In turn, Iran would reverse all the remedial measures it has taken in the wake of Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal. The remaining signatories to the deal would then decide whether the United States should be allowed to reclaim the seat at the table that it abandoned in 2018," Zarif writes. "International agreements are not revolving doors, after all, and it is not an automatic right to return to a negotiated agreement - and enjoy its privileges - after one simply leaves on a whim."

"The bargains - and indeed sacrifices - we made to secure the deal cannot be undone; not now, not ever. There cannot be any renegotiations. The United States cannot insist that 'what's mine is mine and what's yours is negotiable' and expect to have its way with Iran," the foreign minister added.

"The window of opportunity for the new US administration will not be open forever. The initiative squarely rests with Washington."

Aside from the nuclear deal, Zarif also explained Middle East issues needed to be discussed and handled by "the peoples of the region, not outsiders ... neither the United States nor its European allies have the prerogative to lead or sponsor future talks."

Zarif's remarks come just two days into the Biden administration and three days after Antony Blinken, the president's unconfirmed nominee for secretary of state, told a [Senate panel](#) that the Biden team is seeking to start a new nuclear agreement that would also include the participation of Israel and fellow Gulf states.

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Biden Administration to Review US-Taliban Agreement - White House

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told his Afghan counterpart that the Biden administration will review Washington's peace deal with the Taliban, the White House said in a statement.

"Mr. Sullivan... made clear the United States' intention to review the February 2020 US-Taliban agreement, including to assess whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments," the White House said after the call between Sullivan and Afghan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib on Friday.

The White House official said the US will determine if the Taliban is meeting terms of the deal that call for the insurgents to break from terrorist groups, reduce violence and engage in talks with Kabul.

The US-Taliban deal called for Washington to withdraw troops in exchange for insurgent promises not to allow Afghanistan to become a terrorist safe haven. Meanwhile, intra-Afghan talks have been stalled as violence in Afghanistan has been on the rise.

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US Charges Ex-Embassy Employee in Moscow With Conspiracy to Steal Records - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has charged a former employee at its embassy in Moscow with a conspiracy to steal government records and defraud the refugee program, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"The indictment charges... Olesya Leonidovna Krasilova, 43, with conspiracy to steal US government records and to defraud the United States, theft of US government records, and conspiracy to launder money, all related to the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP)," the release said on Friday.

Aws Muwafaq Abduljabbar, the alleged ringleader, and Haitham Isa Saado Sad, who was employed by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services in Amman, Jordan, were also charged for their part in the conspiracy, the release said.

Both, Sad and Krasilova were also charged with computer fraud and abuse, the release added. Krasilova remains at large, while her co-conspirators Abduljabbar and Sad, who were arrested earlier, remain in custody without bond.

If convicted, Krasilova and Sad face a maximum 40 years in prison, while Abduljabbar, faces a 35-year sentence.

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Some 200 National Guard Troops Deployed at US Capitol Test Positive for COVID-19 - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - Nearly 200 members of the National Guard deployed to Washington, DC for the inauguration of President Joe Biden have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, the Wall Street Journal reported.

The 200 troops were part of an approximately 26,000-strong National Guard force sent from all 50 US states to Washington, DC to provide security for the inauguration following the January 6 riot at the US Capitol.

Some 15,000 of the National Guard troops have been orders to leave, while 3,600 more are awaiting orders, the report said. Some 7,000 have been asked to stay until the end of January to help ensure security in the capital, the report added.

News of the infections broke as the troops were reported to be working and moving in tight quarters during the inauguration, in conditions where safe physical distancing protocols could not be maintained.

On Thursday evening, reports emerged that National Guard troops guarding the US Capitol were asked to move and sleep in the Senate parking garage. Since criticism of the troops' treatment ensued on social media, the National Guard members were invited back to the Capitol and in nearby hotels.

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Trump Impeachment Trial to Begin Week of February 8 - Senate Majority Leader Schumer

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump's impeachment trial will begin the week of February 8, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said during remarks on the floor.

Trump was impeached by the House last week for allegedly inciting his supporters to storm Capitol Hill on January 6 to prevent Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's election victory. Trump has denied the charges and said his remarks were "totally appropriate." "[Impeachment] presentations by the parties will commence the week of February the 8th," Schumer said Friday.

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New US Defense Secretary, NATO Chief Discuss Iraq, Afghanistan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - New US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in his first foreign call discussed with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg the need for alliance's "strong deterrence" and its missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Defense Department spokesman John Kirby said.

"The two leaders discussed the importance of our shared values, the current security environment including maintaining a strong NATO deterrence and defense posture, and the ongoing missions in Afghanistan and Iraq," Kirby said.

The spokesperson added that the call is Austin's first made to a foreign leader as Defense Secretary - an act that reinforces the importance of NATO to the United States.

"They also briefly reviewed the upcoming NATO Defense Ministerial and agreed to discuss it again in more detail in the coming weeks," Kirby said.

Austin was confirmed by the Senate in the new position earlier on Friday with 93 lawmakers voting in favor and two against. He served as the head of the US Central Command before retiring in 2016.

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Russian National Firsov Pleads Guilty to Cybercrimes in US - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - Russian National Kirill Firsov pleaded guilty in a US court to cybercrime-related charges and faces up to ten years in prison, court documents revealed.

Under a deal with the prosecution, Firsov admitted that he was an administrator of a Russian-based cyber platform that sold \$17 million in products and services it had hacked from US companies and individuals. However, the deal has to be approved by court.

Firsov, who was arrested in march in New York, faces a prison time of up to 10 years and a fine of up to \$250,000.

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US State Dept. Initiates Review of Terrorist Designation for Yemen's Houthis- Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State has initiated a review of the designation of the rebel Houthi movement as terrorist organization and works as fast as it can to make the determination, a State Department spokesperson said in a statement.

"As noted by Secretary-Designate Blinken, the State Department has initiated a review of Ansarallah's [Houthi] terrorist designations," the spokesperson said on Friday. "We will not publicly discuss or comment on internal deliberations regarding that review; however, with the humanitarian crisis in Yemen we are working as fast as we can to conduct the review and make a determination."

The spokesperson said that although the United States believes that the Houthis bear significant responsibility for the crisis in Yemen and need to change their behavior, Washington needs to ensure that their actions are not impeding the provision of humanitarian aid in the country.

Last week, the US State Department added the Houthi movement to its list of terrorist organizations. The leader of the movement, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, his brother and military commander Abd al-Khaliq al-Houthi and another Ansar Allah commander Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim were listed as global terrorists.

Following the designation, President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said the new US administration would propose to reevaluate the step.

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Washington Suspends Immigration Program for Iraqis Who Helped US Troops - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has suspended an immigration programs for those Iraqis who helped US troops for 90 days, acting State Department spokesperson Daniel Smith said in a statement.

"Effective January 22, 2021, the United States is suspending the Direct Access Program for US-Affiliated Iraqis for 90 days," Smith said on Friday. "As the result of a joint investigation by the US Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of the Inspector General, the Department of Justice is prosecuting individuals for stealing US government records from the Department of State's Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System to take advantage of the Direct Access Program for US-Affiliated Iraqis."

Smith explained that the scheme specifically targeted applications for direct access to the US Refugee Admissions Program. The suspension of the program is necessary to further review and address vulnerabilities, he said.

The State Department has no evidence that the scheme affected the broader refugee admission program, Smith said.

The United States will continue providing Iraq critical support to combat the challenges it faces, Smith added.

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Charged Ex-US Embassy in Moscow Employee Russian National, Remains at Large - Indictment

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - Olesya Krasilova, the former employee of the US Embassy in Moscow who was charged in the United States with conspiracy to steal government records and defraud the refugee program, is a Russian citizen and remains at large, according to a Justice Department indictment.

"Defendant OLESYA LEONIDOVNA KRASILOVA... was a Russian citizen living in Moscow. From in or around August 2011 until in or around February 2019, she was employed as FSN/LES, serving as an Immigration Assistant at the USCIS field office at the US Embassy in Moscow," the indictment said in Friday.

The United States also charged Aws Muwafaq Abduljabbar and Haitham Isa Saado Sad, who was employed by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services in Amman, Jordan.

"Defendants Abduljabbar and Sad were previously arrested and remain held without bond. Defendant Krasilova remains at large," the Justice Department said in a press release about the indictment.

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Trudeau Says Pfizer CEO Promised to Deliver 4Mln Doses on Schedule By End of March

TORONTO, January 22 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said he received assurances from Pfizer's CEO Albert Bourla that the company would deliver 4 million doses of its COVID-19 vaccine by the end of March.

Earlier this week, Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin, the country's vaccine distribution czar, announced that Canada will not receive any new shipments of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine next week as Pfizer restructures its production facility in Europe.

"Yesterday, I spoke with the global CEO of Pfizer, Dr. Bourla. The next few weeks will be challenging when it comes to deliveries. With that said, Dr. Bourla assured me that hundreds of thousands of Pfizer doses will be delivered the week of February 15 and in the weeks to follow. He also confirmed that we will receive all of our four million doses from Pfizer before March 31," Trudeau said during a press briefing on Friday.

The Prime Minister has received blowback for not taking charge amid a crippling vaccine supply shortage across the country that has been the subject of intense criticism domestically. To date, 769,092 vaccine doses have been administered – far below other nations, including Israel, Russia and the United States.

Previously, the task of lobbying Pfizer for more deliveries was increasingly shouldered by provincial premiers with Ontario's Doug Ford pleading with President Joe Biden to permit vaccine deliveries from production sites in the US and saying that if he was the Prime Minister he would be "be up that guy's [Bourla's] ying yang so far with a firecracker, he wouldn't know what hit him."

Canada receives its vaccine supplies from Pfizer's European production facility after former US President Donald Trump signed an executive order to prioritize domestic distribution of COVID-19 vaccines over their shipments to foreign countries

Fortin has previously conceded that Canada will likely experience a shortage of COVID-19 vaccine doses through to the end of the first quarter of 2021.

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US Charges Ex-Embassy Employee in Moscow With Conspiracy to Steal Records - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has charged a former employee at its embassy in Moscow with a conspiracy to steal government records and defraud the refugee program, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"The indictment charges... Olesya Leonidovna Krasilova, 43, with conspiracy to steal US government records and to defraud the United States, theft of US government records, and conspiracy to launder money, all related to the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP)," the release said on Friday.

The United States also charged Aws Muwafaq Abduljabbar and Haitham Isa Saado Sad, who was employed by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services in Amman, Jordan.

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US State Dept. Initiates Review of Terrorist Designation for Yemen's Houthis- Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State has initiated a review of the designation of the rebel Houthi movement as terrorist organization and works as fast as it can to make the determination, a State Department spokesperson said in a statement.

"As noted by Secretary-Designate Blinken, the State Department has initiated a review of Ansarallah's [Houthi] terrorist designations," the spokesperson said on Friday. "We will not publicly discuss or comment on internal deliberations regarding that review; however, with the humanitarian crisis in Yemen we are working as fast as we can to conduct the review and make a determination."

Last week, the US State Department added the Houthi movement to its list of terrorist organizations. The leader of the movement, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, his brother and military commander Abd al-Khaliq al-Houthi and another Ansar Allah commander Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim were listed as global terrorists.

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Trudeau Says Will Look at Shoring Up Vetting System Following Governor General Resignation

TORONTO, January 22 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that he will explore strengthening the vetting process for government appointees after the Queen's representative in Canada resigned ahead of the release of a report that details a toxic work culture at her office. On Thursday, Canada's Governor General, Julie Payette, issued a statement announcing her resignation ahead of 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.

"Obviously, the vetting process that was in place was followed but, obviously, we're also going to look at ways we can strengthen and improve the vetting process for high level appointments," Trudeau said during a press briefing on Friday.

Trudeau would not commit to a committee approach to selecting the next governor general, as was done by previous prime ministers and sidestepped questions about the opposition parties call to choose the next governor general with input from them.

When given the chance, the Prime Minister did not apologize to Rideau Hall staffers for the treatment they received, only saying that all Canadian federal employees deserve to work in a safe and welcoming environment.

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.

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

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Biden Signs Orders to Increase Food Aid, Chart Path to Pay Rise

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed two executive orders that would increase emergency food aid to the most needy and promote a \$15 minimum wage in the federal public sector.

The National Economic Council Director Brian Deese told reporters earlier on Friday that the action will provide "a critical lifeline to millions of families" and is not a substitute for a comprehensive legislative COVID-19 relief that the White House wants to see approved by the Congress as early as next month.

The first executive order directs agencies to consider "a number of actions that will provide emergency relief for working families affected by the COVID-19."

"Today, I am signing an executive order that directs the whole of government effort to help millions of Americans who are badly hurting, requires all federal agencies to do what they can do to do to provide relief to families, small businesses and communities. In the days ahead I expect agencies to act," Biden said during a signing ceremony on Friday.

President specifically asked the Department of Agriculture to look for immediate measures "to make it easier for the hardest-hit families to enroll and claim more generous benefits in the critical food and nutrition assistance area."

"We need to tackle a growing hunger crisis in America. One in seven households in America, one in seven, more than one in five Black and Latino households in America report they do not have enough food to it. That includes nearly 30 million adults and as many as 12 million children," he said.

The same executive order promotes workers' safety.

"And here President Biden will ask the Department of Labor to consider clarifying that workers have a federally guaranteed right to refuse employment that would jeopardize their health," Deese said.

The second document directs the US administration to immediately initiate a process that will allow Biden within a hundred days to issue an executive order requiring federal contractors to pay no less than \$15 an hour and provide emergency paid leave to workers.

"I'll make sure that federal contractors, who are receiving taxpayers' dollars, provide their workers with the pay and benefits they deserve. These are places where federal tax dollars are administered... to build things from ships to staircases," Biden said.

It is also directs the Office of Public Management to develop recommendations to offer a \$15 minimum wage to more federal workers, Deese said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON January 22 (Sputnik) -

NEW START TREATY

* Russia welcomes the United States' wish to extend the nuclear arms reduction treaty New START and is ready to start the talks as soon as possible, spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova said.

* The extension of the New START Treaty between Russia and the United States should come as a first step toward expanding global arms control efforts, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said.

KEYSTONE XL PIPELINE

* A group of US Senators from several Midwestern and Northwestern states will introduce legislation to allow the continued construction of the Keystone XL pipeline extension, Republican Senator James Risch from Idaho said in a statement on Friday.

* Premier Jason Kenney of Alberta, Canada's largest oil-producing province, urged Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to impose proportionate economic consequences on the United States for revoking the Keystone XL pipeline extension permit.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* The Russian Foreign Ministry on Friday commented the US Embassy's publication of venues and times of announced unauthorized activities in Russia, saying attempts of such "coverage" would be viewed as interference in Russia's affairs and would provoke a corresponding reaction.

* Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin discussed with US Ambassador to Moscow John Sullivan climate change, the coronavirus pandemic, the return of the United States to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Paris Climate Agreement, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* The Kremlin believes that calls for participation in unauthorized rallies on January 23 are unacceptable and the only possible opinion on this is that law must be complied with, presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

TEXAS SUES TO STOP BIDEN IMMIGRATION ORDER

* Texas filed a motion in a federal court to halt President Joe Biden's executive order to freeze deportations of illegal aliens for a period of 100 days, state Attorney General Ken Paxton's office said in a press release on Friday.

CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

* There is evidence that the new variant of the coronavirus, which was first detected in the UK last month, may be associated with a higher degree of mortality, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Friday.

* The World Health Organization (WHO) and the alliance of pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and BioNTech agreed on allocation of 40 million doses of the latter's vaccine for the WHO-led global coronavirus vaccine procurement facility COVAX, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

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Biden Says COVID-19 Expected to Kill Over 600,000 People in US

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Friday that COVID-19 is expected to kill more than 600,000 people in the United States.

"A lot of America is hurting. The virus is surging. We are [at] 400,000 dead [and] expected to reach over 600,000," Biden said.

Biden earlier this week predicted that US virus-related deaths would top 500,000 by next month.

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China Pressing US to Schedule Xi-Biden Summit - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - China has been pressing President Joe Biden's administration to explore holding a summit between the two nations' leaders in an attempt to reset the troubled relationship, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday.

In December, soon after Chinese President Xi Jinping congratulated Biden on his election victory, Beijing raised the idea of dispatching Politburo member Yang Jiechi to Washington, the report said, citing people with knowledge of the initiative. The proposal, the report added, was conveyed through letters by the Chinese ambassador to the United States and other intermediaries.

Beijing was planning to bring a message to Biden related to issues other than trade, which was a priority under the Trump administration, according to the report. Since Biden was emphasizing climate change and the pandemic, Yang plans to also focus on those issues, as well as getting in sight a summit between Biden and Xi, the report said.

Former President Donald Trump had launched a major trade war with China and accused it of currency rigging and theft of US intellectual property. Trump also accused China of deliberately spreading the COVID-19 to the world, calling it the "Chinese virus", to the consternation of Beijing, which responded by saying the former president had politicized the pandemic ahead of the US election in November.

However, Biden himself, his cabinet nominees and other administration officials said the US will crack down on China for alleged unfair trading practices and human rights abuses.

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Biden Says US Economic Crisis 'Deepening'

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) – President Joe Biden said on Friday that the COVID-19 induced economic crisis in the United States is deepening.

"We remain in a once-in-a-century public health crisis that has led to the most unequal job and economic crisis in modern history. And the crisis is only deepening," Biden said in his remarks, shortly after a meeting with his economic advisors.

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Texas Sues Biden Administration to Block Deportation Freeze - State Attorney General

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - Texas filed a motion in a federal court to halt President Joe Biden's order freezing deportations for 100 days, state Attorney General Ken Paxton's office said in a press release on Friday.

"Attorney General Ken Paxton today filed a complaint and motion for temporary restraining order in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas, asking the Court to immediately halt the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) freeze on deportations of illegal aliens," the release said.

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Biden Requests Comprehensive Domestic Terror Threat Assessment - White House

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has requested a comprehensive domestic terrorist threat evaluation from the intelligence community, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

"Our initial work on DVE [Domestic Violent Extremism] will broadly fall into three areas. The first is a tasking from President Biden sent to the ODNI [Office of the Director of National Intelligence] today requesting a comprehensive threat assessment coordinated with the FBI and DHS on domestic violent extremism," Psaki said. "This assessment will draw on the analysis from across the government and, as appropriate, non-governmental organizations. The key point here is that we want fact-based analysis upon which we can shape policy."

Psaki continued to say that the second area will be the building of National Security Council (NSC) capability to focus on countering domestic violent extremism.

"As a part of this, the NSC will undertake a policy review effort to determine how the government can share information better about this threat, support efforts to prevent radicalization, disrupt violent extremist networks and more," she explained.

The third, Psaki added, will be coordinating relevant parts of the federal government to enhance and accelerate efforts to address DVE.

US President Joe Biden in his inauguration speech on Wednesday said his administration will confront and defeat white supremacy and domestic terrorism. On January 6, protesters stormed Capitol Hill in a bid to prevent Congress from finalizing Biden's election victory. White supremacist symbols were on display among the crowd of pro-Trump supporters.

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Trudeau to Raise Keystone XL Cancellation in First Conversation With Biden on Friday

TORONTO, January 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's decision to revoke the permits for the Keystone XL pipeline extension will be a topic of discussion when he and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau speak later on Friday, the Prime Minister told reporters.

In one of his first acts as US president, Biden signed an executive order to rescind the Keystone XL construction permit granted in 2019 by former President Donald Trump.

"I will express my concern for jobs and livelihoods in Canada, particularly in the West, directly in my conversation with President Biden," Trudeau during a press briefing on Friday.

However, some experts and officials have expressed concern that the Trudeau government is willing to concede on certain Canadian interests, including the Keystone XL extension project, in order to mend bilateral relations, which suffered during the Trump's time in office.

"The fact that we have so much alignment, not just me and President Biden, but Canadians and President Biden," Trudeau said, noting a number of intersecting interests, including climate change. "I am very much looking forward to working with President Biden."

However, some provincial premiers have expressed a desire to see a tougher response to Biden's decision.

Premier Jason Kenney of Alberta, Canada's largest oil-producing province, urged Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to impose proportionate economic consequences on the United States for revoking the permit or, at the very least, seek compensation for Government of Alberta, which has invested billions in the project and TC Energy, the pipeline's parent company, for what the premier says is a clear violation of the investor-protection provisions in the US-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA).

While Kenney is the first Canadian premier to openly press Trudeau for more action, he, reportedly, is backed by other conservative premiers who allegedly are ready for "war" with Washington over the decision.

The Keystone is an oil pipeline system that moves Alberta crude oil from the Canadian town of Hardisty to refineries and tank farms in the US states of Illinois, Oklahoma and Texas. The first

three phases of the system are currently operational, however, the construction of the fourth phase, better known as Keystone XL, which is planned to transport oil to the US state of Nebraska, has caused a major uproar on both sides of the border.

The proposed section of the pipeline was twice rejected by the Obama administration, but was backed by Trump, who is set to leave office tomorrow.

In September, the US Supreme Court rejected a request from the Trump administration and TC Energy to dismiss a lower court ruling blocking further construction of the pipeline because of a violation related to a water-crossing permit.

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US to Work With Partners to Deter North Korea – White House

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) – The United States will work with its partners in the region to deter North Korea, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday. “As we have historically, the United States will work closely with partners in the region to determine on path forward and work together on deterrence,” Psaki said during a press briefing. Washington plans to adopt its new strategy toward North Korea in in close consultations with South Korea, Japan and other allies, Psaki added.

“We obviously have a vital interest in deterring North Korea,” she said.

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US Senators to Introduce Bill to Allow Keystone XL Pipeline Construction to Continue

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - A group of US Senators from several Midwestern and Northwestern states will introduce legislation to allow the continued construction of the Keystone XL pipeline extension, Republican Senator James Risch from Idaho said in a statement on Friday.

In one of his first acts as US president, Joe Biden signed an executive order to rescind the Keystone XL construction permit granted in 2019 by former President Donald Trump.

“Following President Biden’s executive order blocking construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline, US Senators Jim Risch and Mike Crapo (both R-Idaho) announced they will join Senator Steve Daines (R-Mont.) and several western senators in introducing legislation to authorize the continued construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline,” statement said.

Republican Senators John Barrasso, Roger Marshall, Jerry Moran, James Inhofe and John Hoeven will co-sponsor the bill, the statement said.

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Biden, Mexican President to Speak Later on Friday - White House

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will speak with his Mexican counterpart later on Friday, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters.

"Later today, the President will speak with... President of Mexico Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador," Psaki said.

Psaki said the president will also speak with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, which the White House confirmed earlier this week.

The conversation with the Mexican president will be among Biden's first wave of calls with world leaders after being inaugurated on Wednesday, and comes after he signed an executive order to halt the construction of the wall on the US southern border.

Mexican Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard has already welcomed Biden's move.

Democrat Biden was sworn in as the 46th President of the United States on January 20. Just hours after the inauguration ceremony, he signed 17 executive orders to reverse some of his predecessor's policies.

In 2017, then-President Donald Trump signed an executive order to build a 500-mile wall along the southern border. As of January 5, about 90 percent of the project had been completed.

Biden has made it clear that he would not demolish what has already been built.

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Biden Requests Comprehensive Domestic Terror Threat Assessment - White House-

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White House Confirms Biden Will Talk With Mexico President Later on Friday

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The White House has confirmed that US President Joe Biden will speak with his Mexican counterpart later on Friday, spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters.

"Later today, the President will speak with Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, we confirmed that earlier this week," Psaki said. "He'll also speak with President of Mexico Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador."

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Alberta Premier Urges Trudeau to Ensure US Pays for Canceling Keystone Pipeline

TORONTO, January 22 (Sputnik) - Premier Jason Kenney of Alberta, Canada's largest oil-producing province, urged Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to impose proportionate economic consequences on the United States for revoking the Keystone XL pipeline extension permit. In one of his first actions as US president, Joe Biden signed an executive order to rescind the Keystone XL construction permit granted in 2019 by outgoing President Donald Trump.

"Just as your government stood up for Canadian aluminum and steel workers when faced with an unfair US tariff in 2018, it is imperative that you take action for the thousands more workers in the energy sector and their vast contributions to the Canadian economy. I strongly urge you to ensure that their proportionate economic consequences in response to these unfair US actions," Kenney said in a letter on Friday, referencing counter-tariffs imposed on US metal imports in 2018 and a similar threat last year.

Kenney added that the Trudeau government should, at the very least, pursue the US to compensate the Government of Alberta, which has invested billions in the project and TC Energy, the pipeline's parent company, for what the premier says is a clear violation of the investor-protection provisions in the US-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA).

Kenney has repeatedly stressed that the Biden administration acted maliciously in canceling the pipeline extension project without consultation and that the decision demonstrates the unpredictability of the US regulatory system, a precedent that will harm bilateral relations going forward.

The Keystone is an oil pipeline system that moves Alberta crude oil from the Canadian town of Hardisty to refineries and tank farms in the US states of Illinois, Oklahoma and Texas. The first three phases of the system are currently operational, however, the construction of the fourth phase, better known as Keystone XL, which is planned to transport oil to the US state of Nebraska, has caused a major uproar on both sides of the border.

The proposed section of the pipeline was twice rejected by the Obama administration, but was backed by Trump, who is set to leave office tomorrow.

In September, the US Supreme Court rejected a request from the Trump administration and TC Energy to dismiss a lower court ruling blocking further construction of the pipeline because of a violation related to a water-crossing permit.

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US House Intelligence Chief Urges DNI to Declassify Report on Khashoggi's Death

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - US House Intelligence Committee Chair Adam Schiff on Friday called on the new Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Avril Haines to declassify a report regarding Saudi Arabia's alleged culpability for journalist Jamal Khashoggi's killing. The columnist for the *Washington Post* went missing in 2018 after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The kingdom initially denied any knowledge of Khashoggi's whereabouts but eventually admitted that he was killed and dismembered inside the mission.

"The importance of speaking the truth and confronting the powerful over their misconduct is at the heart of bipartisan concerns over the year-long delay in ODNI's production of an unclassified report to Congress regarding Saudi Arabia's culpability for the brutal, premeditated murder of *Washington Post* journalist and US resident Jamal Khashoggi," Schiff wrote to Haines.

Schiff criticized former President Donald Trump's administration for refusing for a year to make the report public.

Saudi Arabia sentenced eight suspects for their role in Khashoggi's death and repeatedly denied allegations that any members of the royal family were involved.

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New US Defense Secretary, NATO Chief to Speak by Phone Friday Afternoon - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - Newly confirmed US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is expected to speak with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg later on Friday, the Defense Department said in a statement.

"He will speak by phone with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at 3:45 p.m. [EST]," the statement said on Friday.

Austin, who was confirmed by the Senate earlier in the day, will also receive operational briefings about China and the Middle East, the release said.

Austin served as a US Army general and former head of the Central Command (CENTCOM) and retired in 2016.

Austin gained the support of an overwhelming majority of lawmakers, with 93 voting in favor of his confirmation and two voting against.

On Thursday, the House of Representatives and the Senate passed by the required majorities a waiver legislation so that Austin would be able to bypass the required seven-year period for a retired military to serve as Defense Secretary.

Austin will be the first African-American ever to serve as US Defense Secretary.

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Alberta Premier Urges Trudeau to Ensure US Pays for Canceling Keystone Pipeline

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"Just as your government stood up for Canadian aluminum and steel workers when faced with an unfair US tariff in 2018, it is imperative that you take action for the thousands more workers in the energy sector and their vast contributions to the Canadian economy. I strongly urge you to ensure that their proportionate economic consequences in response to these unfair US actions," Kenney said in a letter, referencing counter-tariffs imposed on US metal imports last year.

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Biden Freeze on Deportations Threatens to Undermine US Security - Senator Rubio

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's new freeze on deporting illegal immigrants will allow criminals to remain in the country and put US citizens at risk, Senator Marco Rubio said on Friday.

Biden signed an order this week that directs three security agencies to halt deportations for 100 days.

"It is deeply troubling that one of the first actions taken by the Biden Administration could undermine the safety and security of all Americans, including immigrants here lawfully," Rubio said in a letter to Acting Homeland Security Chief David Pekoske.

Rubio said the directive will prevent the removal of illegal immigrants who have committed violent crimes such as rape, sexual assault, and other aggravated felonies.

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New US Defense Secretary, NATO Chief to Speak by Phone Friday Afternoon - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - Newly confirmed US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is expected to speak with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg later in the day, the Pentagon said on Friday.

"He will speak by phone with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at 3:45 p.m. [EST]," the Pentagon said in a statement.

Austin, who was confirmed by the Senate earlier on Friday, will also receive operational briefings about China and the Middle East, the release added.

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UN Chief Welcomes US Seeking 5 Year Extension of New Start Treaty - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 22 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the US decision to seek a five-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and encouraged both sides to quickly complete the necessary steps to begin talks on new arms control measures, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

"The Secretary-General welcomes the decision by the United States to seek a five-year extension of the New Start Treaty, as well as the Russian Federation's reiteration that it also seeks a five-year extension," Dujarric said. "The Secretary-General encourages both states to work quickly to complete the necessary procedure for the New Start's extension before the fifth of February expiration, and move as soon as possible to negotiations on new arms control measures."

New START has been in force since 2011 and is due to expire on February 5. It is the only remaining legally binding agreement on nuclear arms control between Russia and the United States. The treaty limits each country's nuclear arsenal to 700 intercontinental ballistic missiles, 1,550 nuclear warheads and 800 launchers.

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Senate Finance Committee Unanimously Approves Yellen as Next US Treasury Secretary

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - Former Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen won unanimous approval from the Senate Finance Committee, which fast-tracked her confirmation as the first-ever female US Secretary of the Treasury on Friday.

The vote was 26 to zero, a virtually unprecedented indication of bipartisan Senate approval. Yellen's confirmation as President Joe Biden's first Treasury Secretary is expected to be confirmed by the full Senate this afternoon.

Both Republican and Democratic Senate leaders have said Yellen needs to be confirmed as quickly as possible to expedite work on Biden's emergency financial relief package for the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Yellen previously served as the first-ever female Chair of the Federal Reserve from 2014 to 2018. She was appointed by President Barack Obama and was often publicly criticized for her cautious financial policies by his successor, President Donald Trump.

Yellen currently is a professor emerita at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley and was chair of the Federal Reserve from 2014 to 2018.

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IOM Welcomes US Inclusion of Migrants in Coronavirus Vaccine Roll-Out - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, January 22 (Sputnik) - The International Organization for Migration (IOM) in a statement on Friday praised US President Joe Biden's new policy to include migrants in the national coronavirus vaccine rollout.

"IOM welcomes the inclusion of migrants in the new US administration's national strategy for COVID-19 response and its commitment to ensuring that safe, effective, cost-free vaccines are available to the entire US public - regardless of their immigration status," the statement said.

IOM called on all countries to implement similar approaches that would include migrants in immunization campaigns.

On Thursday, Biden signed a number of executive orders in an attempt to address the novel coronavirus pandemic in the United States focused on unified and effective response to combat the novel coronavirus.

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US Senate Confirms Retired General Lloyd Austin as Secretary of Defense

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Friday confirmed retired US Army general and former Central Command (CENTCOM) commander as President Joe Biden's first secretary of defense.

Austin gained the support of an overwhelming majority of lawmakers, with 93 voting in favor of his confirmation and only two voting against it.

On Thursday, both the House of Representatives and the Senate had passed by the required majorities, waiver legislation setting aside for Austin the congressional ban on any former military officer serving as secretary of defense for at least seven years after he retired. Austin, a four star general, retired in 2016.

Austin will be the first African-American ever to serve as secretary of defense.

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US House to Send Articles of Impeachment to Senate Monday - Senate Majority Leader

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will deliver the articles of impeachment for former President Donald Trump to the Senate on Monday, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Friday.

"I have spoken to Speaker [Nancy] Pelosi who informed me that the articles would be delivered to the Senate on Monday," Schumer said on the Senate floor. "It will be a full trial. It will be a fair trial."

Schumer insisted that the trial had to go ahead.

"Make no mistake: A trial will be held in the US Senate and there will be a vote whether to convict the president," he said.

It will be the first time in US history that any president faced two impeachment trials or that any president was impeached after he left office.

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UN Warns of Imminent Risk of Further Escalation in Sudan's Darfur

UNITED NATIONS, January 22 (Sputnik) - The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) warned of an impending risk of further violence escalation in Sudan's Darfur following the recent deadly unrest in the region, OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani said in a statement on Friday.

"We have received deeply disturbing information about two deadly incidents of inter-communal violence in Darfur over the past week," Shamdasani said. "These incidents raise serious concerns about the imminent risk of further violence in Darfur, in an environment where decades-old ethnic and tribal tensions that were further stoked by the previous regime continue to fester."

Earlier in the month, at least 232 people were killed and more injured in two separate incidents of inter-communal clashes in West and South Darfur, Shamdasani said.

The hostilities erupted three weeks after a joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission pulled out from the region, handing responsibility to the government in Khartoum.

Shamdasani called on Sudan to promptly ensure the protection of civilians in Darfur and carry out a thorough and effective investigation to bring the perpetrators to justice.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, more than 100,000 people were already displaced due to the violence.

The violence came as part of a long-term internal conflict, which escalated in 2003 when insurgent groups launched a campaign to oust then-President Omar al-Bashir, who was overthrown later in 2019.

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UN Rights Expert Calls for Equitable Global Distribution of COVID-19 Vaccines - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, January 22 (Sputnik) - The UN Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity Obiora Okafor on Friday called on countries to cooperate in order to ensure an equitable global COVID-19 vaccine distribution program for all.

"International vaccine solidarity should be much preferred over international vaccine competition, such as the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility (COVAX) led by the World Health Organization that aims at global equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines by fairly distributing two billion doses by the end of 2021," the Okafor said in a statement.

Okafor pointed out there is a sharp divide in vaccine distribution, in which the much richer and less populated countries in the Global North have cornered the vast majority of COVID-19 vaccines.

Meanwhile, the Global South with the bulk majority of the world's population is left with almost no access to these medicines.

Okafor said the coronavirus can still travel from the mostly unvaccinated Global South to the Global North risking to bolster or reignite the pandemic even in states that will vaccinate a significant portion of their populations.

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US Senate Confirms Retired General Lloyd Austin as Secretary of Defense

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - A majority of lawmakers in the US Senate on Friday confirmed retired US Army general and former Central Command (CENTCOM) commander as President Joe Biden's first secretary of defense.

On Thursday, both the House of Representatives and the Senate had passed by the required majorities, waiver legislation setting aside for Austin the congressional ban on any former military officer serving as secretary of defense for at least seven years after he retired. Austin, a four star general, retired in 2016.

Austin will be the first African-American ever to serve as secretary of defense.

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US House to Send Impeachment Articles to Senate on Monday - Senate Majority Leader

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will deliver the articles of impeachment for former President Donald Trump to the Senate on Monday, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Friday.

"I have spoken to Speaker [Nancy] Pelosi who informed me that the articles would be delivered to the Senate on Monday," Schumer said on the Senate floor. "It will be a full trial. It will be a fair trial."

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US State Dept. Advises Americans in Russia to Avoid Opposition Protests

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The US State Department issued a travel advisory on Friday urging Americans in Russia to stay away from the expected opposition protests and provided a list of places and the times of such gatherings in a dozen major cities.

"These demonstrations are likely to be unauthorized. Given the likely substantial police presence and possible dispersal of demonstrators into other areas of the cities, US citizens should avoid these demonstrations and any demonstration-related activities," the advisory said. Protests are expected to take place in Russia on January 23 in support of opposition figure Alexey Navalny who was detained last Sunday upon arrival from Germany where he underwent treatment for alleged poisoning. The Russian authorities detained Navalny for a period of 30 days for violating the terms of his probation on an earlier conviction for embezzlement. The State Department also recommended in the advisory that Americans in Russia notify friends and family of their safety and carry proper identification documents, including a US passport with a current Russian visa.

On Thursday, Moscow Prosecutor's Office spokesperson Lyudmila Nefedova told Sputnik the office has issued warnings to the heads of five websites that publishing calls to participate in unauthorized gatherings on January 23 constitute a violation of the law.

The spokesperson for the Kremlin said Navalny's calls on his supporters to stage protests over his arrest were "raising concerns."

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Recent Clashes in West Darfur City of Al Junaynah Kills at Least 10 Children - UNICEF

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The recent wave of tribal violence in the West Darfur capital of Al Junaynah has killed more than 150 people including 10 children, UNICEF Representative in Sudan Abdullah Fadil said in a statement on Friday.

"It is one week since the violence in Al Junaynah began," Fadil said. "Over 150 people have now lost their lives, including 10 children, the youngest under five years old. Too many lives lost. Too many young futures cut short."

Armed violence erupted in Al Junaynah after a skirmish last Friday at a camp for displaced people. An Arab man was reportedly killed in what began as a fistfight in the camp, igniting waves of retaliatory violence between Arabs and non-Arabs across West Darfur.

Fadil noted that only a year ago, similar "senseless violence" in the city killed more than 80 people, including children, and displaced many more. The UNICEF official called on tribal leaders, the tribes themselves and all young people in West Darfur to immediately halt the fighting.

"We must finally address the long-term root causes of conflict, and lay the foundations for lasting peace," he said.

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNCHR) earlier on Friday noted that more than 100,000 people have been displaced and 250 people killed as a result of the intercommunal clashes, which started in West Darfur and spread to South Darfur the next day.

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US National Security Adviser Tells Europe Biden Ready to Cooperate on China, Iran, Russia

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan reiterated in a series of phone calls with senior European officials that the Biden's administration is ready to cooperate closely on priorities related to China, Iran and Russia, White House National Security Council Spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement on Friday.

"With European partners Mr. Sullivan underscored the Biden Administration's intention to strengthen the transatlantic alliance and affirmed our readiness to work closely with European allies on a range of shared priorities, including issues pertaining to China, Iran, and Russia," Horne said.

The spokesperson also said that Sullivan held separate introductory calls with the Diplomatic Adviser to the French President Emmanuel Bonne, Foreign and Security Policy Adviser to the German Chancellor Jan Hacker and British Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs Dominic Raab.

In a conversation with Secretary General of Japan's National Security Secretariat Shigeru Kitamura, Sullivan underscored the importance of the US-Japan alliance and a desire to work together to address key regional and global challenges, including COVID-19, China and North Korea, according to the statement.

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NATO Chief Welcomes Biden's Intention to Extend New Start Treaty With Russia

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Friday welcomed US President Joe Biden's plans to renew the New Start Treaty with Russia before it expires in February, while underscoring the need for arms control agreements.

"I welcome President Biden's announcement and his intention to seek an extension of the New Start Treaty. I have stated repeatedly that we should not end up in a situation where we have no agreement, no limitation whatsoever on the number of nuclear warheads, and therefore an extension of the New Start Treaty is important," Stoltenberg said.

The alliance chief urged all parties to avoid the treaty's expiration, noting that the agreement has been of "great importance" to all NATO member countries. The treaty's extension should also come as a first step toward expanding global arms control agreements, he said.

"An extension of the New Start Treaty is not the end. It should be the beginning of renewed efforts to strengthen international arms control, to look into how we can cover more weapons systems and also include more nations such as China," he said.

Stoltenberg said Washington has consulted closely with its NATO allies on the bilateral US-Russian agreement, and expressed confidence that the United States would continue to work closely with its partners "on arms control in general."

Earlier on Friday, the White House confirmed that new US President Joe Biden would seek a five-year extension of the nuclear arms reduction treaty, which is set to expire on February 5.

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US National Security Adviser Tells Europe Biden Ready to Cooperate on China, Iran, Russia
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She added that Sullivan held separate introductory calls with senior officials from France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Japan.

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Stoltenberg Says New Start Extension Should Be Step Toward Expanding Global Arms Effort

WASHINGTON, January 22 (Sputnik) - The extension of the New Start Treaty between Russia and the United States should come as a first step toward expanding global arms control efforts, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in a press conference on Friday.

"An extension of the New Start Treaty is not the end. It should be the beginning of renewed efforts to strengthen international arms control, to look into how we can cover more weapons systems and also include more nations such as China," Stoltenberg said.

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