

01/26/21 Tuesday

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Trump May Avoid Senate Conviction as Majority of Republicans Vote Trial Unconstitutional by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In the wake of the deadly January 6 Capitol riot, congressional lawmakers in the US House of Representatives impeached the former US president, Donald Trump, for "incitement of insurrection". The second impeachment of a sitting US president is a first for the nation. In a key test vote ahead of the impeachment trial in the US Senate, all but five Republican senators on Tuesday voted in favor of deeming the proceedings unconstitutional, raising concerns that Trump will avoid a conviction in the chamber.

Although the Senate impeachment conviction trial is not due to start for another two weeks, Senate Republicans were sworn in on Tuesday for the looming proceedings. Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) immediately called for a vote to declare the February 9 trial unconstitutional.

By the end of the call, the motion gained a vote of 55 in favor and 45 against. The five GOP lawmakers who voted to table Paul's argument included Sens. Mitt Romney (R-UT), Ben Sasse (R-NE), Susan Collins (R-ME), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Pat Toomey (R-PA).

Shortly before the Tuesday vote, [Paul voiced](#) his intention to get at least 34 Republicans to vote with him on a motion to prove the trial is "dead on arrival."

To date, the vote is the clearest sign that Trump is likely to be acquitted, as Republican lawmakers line up to argue that the impeachment conviction trial is unconstitutional on the grounds that Trump is no longer in office.

In order to convict Trump, a total of 67 lawmakers from the upper congressional chamber would need to vote in favor of the impeachment.

While many Republican lawmakers criticized Trump's instigation of the deadly January 6 Capitol riot that saw five killed, including a police officer, others have rushed to question the validity of the trial or whether the former commander-in-chief's remarks on the US election constituted "incitement of insurrection". Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) [questioned whether](#) trials could be held against former officials.

Ahead of the vote, Sen. Joni Ernst (R-IA) acknowledged in [a statement](#) that Trump "exhibited poor leadership and holds some responsibility for the anarchy that ensued at the heart of our democracy," before stating that holding a trial against him may prompt issues moving forward. "Congress would be opening itself to a dangerous standard of using impeachment as a tool for political revenge against a private citizen, and the only remedy at this point is to strip the convicted of their ability to run for future office – a move that would undoubtedly strip millions of voters of their ability to choose a candidate in the next election," she suggested.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) indicated that should the chamber fail to carry out the trial, it would ultimately amount to a "get out of jail free card" for others accused of wrongdoing as they exit a government post.

Should Trump be convicted in a majority vote, it would bar him from ever again holding any official post. The upcoming trial marks the first time that an ex-president undergoes an impeachment after departing from the Oval Office.

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Acting Capitol Police Chief Apologizes, Says Force 'Should Have Been More Prepared' for Deadly Riot
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

On January 6, Trump loyalists gathered in Washington DC, as congress confirmed the winner of the US election; however, bolstered by calls made at the outgoing president's 'Stop the Steal' rally minutes earlier, hundreds of individuals, in a riot that saw five people killed, stormed the Capitol and temporarily halted proceedings, shocking the world.

Acknowledging setbacks that law enforcement officials endured as many hundreds of Trump supporters forced their way through security barriers, acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman issued [a statement](#) to congressional officials on Tuesday, formally apologizing for security failures.

At the time of the deadly riot, Steven Sund was the Capitol Police chief. Sund was quickly replaced by Pittman after the former resigned in the fallout over the violent insurrection. Prior to the new appointment, Pittman had served as the assistant chief for Protective and Intelligence Operations.

During a closed-door briefing with members of the House Appropriations Committee, Pittman stated Capitol Police had "failed to meet its own high standards as well as yours," before noting that she was present to "offer my sincerest apologies on behalf of the department."

"Let me be clear: the department should have been more prepared for this attack," Pittman told officials. "By January 4th, the department knew that the January 6th event would not be like any of the previous protests held in 2020. We knew that militia groups and white supremacist organizations would be attending. We also knew that some of these participants were intending to bring firearms and other weapons to the event. We knew that there was a strong potential for violence and that Congress was the target."

"The department prepared in order to meet these challenges, but we did not do enough," the official said, before explaining that added measures included requiring all available officers to be on shift, activating SWAT units and upping the number of civil disturbance units, as well as reshaping security perimeters based on instructions received from both the House and Senate sergeant-at-arms, both of [whom resigned](#) from their posts in the wake of the deadly riot.

"In my experience, I do not believe there was any preparations that would have allowed for an open campus in which lawful protesters could exercise their First Amendment right to free speech and at the same time prevented the attack on Capitol grounds that day," Pittman noted.

"However, I do believe certain challenges the department faced the day of the attack could have been overcome with additional preparation."

Overall, what the force needed, according to reports, was a stiff increase in manpower, a request Sund made to the Capitol Police Board prior to the riot that was subsequently rejected, Pittman said, noting that Sund was, instead, encouraged by the board to reach out to the Washington DC National Guard for added assistance. Ahead of the Capitol siege, the police force only had about 1,200 people working on the site.

With Capitol Police spread thin, as armed and violent individuals stormed the federal building, the agency found itself struggling to meet the need of the moment even as additional forces were deployed to handle a pair of pipe bomb reports as well as that of a report of a van filled with explosive chemicals. To make matters more dire, a second request from Sund to the Capitol Police Board to deploy National Guard troops was held off "for over an hour," Pittman detailed.

Aside from lax preventative measures and insufficient troop figures, Pittman also informed the members of the committee - which funds the Capitol Police - that officers were not given the proper tools, and that a faulty communication system within the US Capitol prevented officers from understanding what orders were being handed down by leadership.

Pittman stressed that the agency would now take up new measures to better prepare against similar incidences and protect the inhabitants and physical infrastructure. "The US Capitol Police remain steadfast in addressing the new challenges that we face head on," she said. Pittman's remarks came as reports surfaced detailing that the commander of the DC National Guard was prevented from allowing troop deployments to the nation's capital ahead of the deadly riot, which saw 5 killed, including a law enforcement officer. The [Washington Post reported](#) that the restriction was imposed by the US Department of Defense, and that a delay in deployment was the result of local law enforcement not requesting the DC National Guard to prepare a contingency force.

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No Letting Go - Political Cartoon

Following an exit from the Oval Office, former US President Donald Trump relocated to Florida apparently to live out his post-presidency in what was formerly referred to as the Winter White House, leaving many curious as to what steps he may take next.

Trump [announced late Monday](#) the establishment of a post-presidency office in Palm Beach County, Florida, naming his newly-formed headquarters the "Office of the Former President." [A release](#) detailing the development notes that in addition to managing Trump's correspondence, appearances and official activities, the office would carry on "the agenda of the Trump administration through advocacy, organizing, and public activism."

The announcement came as managers of the House of Representatives officially delivered Trump's second impeachment to the US Senate, an unprecedented occurrence in US history. With the Trump Senate conviction trial set to take place in two weeks' time, it's fair to say the former president's name is certain to stay in the headlines for the present moment. All press is

good press when one intends to stay relevant and at the forefront of the attention of one's loyalists, right?

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Eli Lilly Reveals Antibody Cocktail 'Significantly' Reduces COVID-19 Hospitalizations, Deaths by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In light of a limited COVID-19 vaccine supply and rollout plans riddled with problems, US health experts are attempting to concoct additional preventative measures to combat the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the deadly coronavirus that causes COVID-19. To date, over 25 million Americans have been infected in the pandemic and over 425,000 have died.

Multinational pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly [announced on Tuesday](#) that a combination treatment of two monoclonal antibodies that it developed has the ability to reduce the rate of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths, by some 70%.

The results stem from a phase 3 trial that Eli Lilly conducted involving approximately 1,035 patients, some of whom were given a combination of neutralizing antibodies; bamlanivimab and etesevimab, while others formed the trial's placebo group.

Analyzing the findings of the trial, researchers determined that when bamlanivimab and etesevimab were both administered to participants, the treatment "demonstrated statistically significant improvements" and provided "strong evidence that the therapy reduced viral load and accelerated symptom resolution."

The combination therapy saw just 11 "events" including hospitalizations, whereas 36 events were recorded in the placebo group. The Eli Lilly statement noted there were 10 deaths during the trial, all involving individuals in the placebo group.

"These exciting results, which replicate positive Phase 2 data in a much larger set of patients, add valuable clinical evidence about the role neutralizing antibodies can play in fighting this pandemic," said Daniel Skovronsky, the chief scientific officer and president of Lilly Research Laboratories, in a statement accompanying the release.

"Notably, the 70% decrease in risk of hospitalizations or death seen in this Phase 3 trial of bamlanivimab and etesevimab together is consistent with the reduction in risk of hospitalization or [emergency room] visits seen with bamlanivimab alone in the Phase 2 trial."

An emergency use authorization (EUA) [was granted](#) for bamlanivimab by the US Food and Drug Administration in early November 2020 to treat mild to moderate COVID-19 diagnoses in adult and pediatric sufferers.

It's unclear if and whether an EUA will be granted for the combination treatment.

Eli Lilly's announcement came days after the [company reported](#) that bamlanivimab alone cut the chances of nursing home staff and residents developing symptomatic COVID-19 infections by 80%, compared to the placebo group.

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South African President Accuses 'Rich Countries' of Hoarding COVID-19 Vaccines
by [Evan Craighead](#)

South Africa has closed 20 land border posts as it continues to combat the original severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, as well as a new COVID-19 variant that has spread internationally after widespread holiday travel.

Speaking to fellow leaders during a virtual World Economic Forum conference on Tuesday, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa accused wealthier nations to halt their stockpiling of COVID-19 vaccines so that other countries have a fair shot at combating the highly-contagious pandemic and its variants.

"The rich countries of the world went out and acquired large doses," Ramaphosa, chairman of the African Union, proclaimed. "Some even acquired up to four times what their population needs [...] to the exclusion of other countries."

The European Union has presently ordered some 2.3 billion doses of various COVID-19 vaccines for its estimated population of 450 million people, [Reuters reported](#). The African Union, on the other hand, has only been able to secure 270 million shots for the entire nation, as a supplement to the 600 million doses promised by the World Health Organization and the Gavi vaccine alliance.

UK Health Minister Matt Hancock fired back at Ramaphosa's comments on Tuesday, telling reporters that his primary job is to protect British folks, not everyone in the world.

"But we've got to make sure that there's broad availability of vaccines for the rest of the world too," he acknowledged during a virtual event organized by think-tank Chatham House.

As of this article's publication, more than 1.4 million cases of COVID-19 have been logged in South Africa and at least 41,117 related deaths have occurred, according to the Johns Hopkins University [COVID-19 dashboard](#).

The South African president's comments come alongside a series of entry bans from countries that fear a newly-identified 501Y.V2 variant - a COVID-19 that is 50% more infectious and has been identified in around 20 countries, including South Africa.

"We are adding South Africa to the restricted list because of the concerning variant present that has already spread beyond South Africa," US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention principal deputy director Dr. Anne Schuchat detailed [to Reuters](#) on Sunday.

Research, funded by the International Chamber of Commerce [and released](#) this week, estimates the global economy could lose up to \$9.2 trillion if the COVID-19 vaccine distribution is too slow. So-called 'advanced economies' would bear the brunt of up to half of those losses, claimed the Paris-based NGO.

"No economy can fully recover until we have global equitable access to vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics," asserted study co-author Şebnem Kalemli-Özcan a University of Maryland, Neil-Moskowitz-endowed, professor of economics and finance. "The path we are on leads to less growth, more deaths, and a longer economic recovery."

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US Looking to Build New Saudi Arabia Bases as Biden Pressured to End Support for Riyadh's Yemen War

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US troops have not been based on Saudi soil since shortly after the September 11, 2001, attacks, which al-Qaeda claimed were motivated in part by the presence of US forces in the Muslim holy land.

According to a report by the [Wall Street Journal](#), the Pentagon is in talks with Riyadh to expand the former's global military footprint by turning three Saudi facilities into "dual use" bases. Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, the head of US Central Command, told the WSJ that the Pentagon was looking for "options" in case of a conflict with Iran, "and options are always a good thing for a commander to have."

The three sites noted by McKenzie are the ports at Yanbu, on the Red Sea near Medina; King Fahd Air Base in Taif, east of Mecca; and King Faisal Air Base in Tabuk, about 65 miles south of the Saudi border with Israel.

While the US operated out of several Saudi bases in the 1980s and 1990s, they were pulled out of the country in 2003 after Saudi-born terrorist leader Osama bin Laden [cited their presence](#) close to the holy Muslim cities of Mecca and Medina as part of the reason al-Qaeda targeted the US. Some [2,500 US troops returned](#) to Prince Sultan Air Base last February, however, reported to be on a ground-based and airborne air defense mission.

"These are prudent military planning measures that allow for temporary or conditional access of facilities in the event of a contingency, and are not provocative in any way, nor are they an expansion of the US footprint in the region, in general, or in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in particular," US Navy Captain Bill Urban, a spokesperson for Central Command, told the [Associated Press](#).

McKenzie said the US has already tested loading and unloading cargo at Yanbu, a major petroleum exporting facility and the western terminus of an East-West crude oil pipeline running from Abqaiq.

Houthis Designated as Terrorist Group

Both the Abqaiq facility and the pipeline have been targets of the armed Houthi opposition faction in Yemen, against whom a Saudi-led coalition has been waging war since 2015. Urban said CENTCOM had been planning such contingencies since September 2019, when a swarm of suicide drones struck Abqaiq and al-Khourais, another petroleum facility in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack, but the US pointed the finger at Iran.

Earlier on Tuesday, the administration of US President Joe Biden granted a one-month [reprieve from sanctions](#) barring transactions with the Houthis that were imposed earlier this month by outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. In a January 19 declaration, Pompeo designated the Houthis a terrorist organization in a move widely decried by human rights groups. As the

Houthi control much of Yemen, including its most populated areas, getting food and medical aid to the Yemeni population became all but impossible due to the declaration.

Biden and several members of his foreign policy team have previously made clear their opposition to [US support](#) for the Saudi war in Yemen, which has killed at least 100,000 and imperiled millions with starvation, cholera, and other deadly conditions. While his Tuesday reprieve did not reverse Pompeo's designation, the State Department under newly-minted secretary Antony Blinken has [initiated a review](#) of the designation.

Khassoggi Dossier Could Sour Relations

Biden's director of national intelligence, Avril Haines, has also made clear the president [intends to declassify](#) an intelligence dossier on the October 2018 murder of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khassoggi.

The expatriate writer and Riyadh insider was killed by a Saudi hit squad in the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. His body was then carved into small pieces to disguise the crime. While then-US President Donald Trump demurred on assigning blame for Khassoggi's death, the [Washington Post](#) reported that the CIA has evidence that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the power behind the Saudi throne, was responsible for the assassination.

According to the Post, Trump was afraid of alienating Riyadh amid his administration's 'maximum pressure' push against Iran, the kingdom's most acute rival in the region. A [separate investigation](#) by professional representatives of the Saudi monarchy accused several close advisers of a conspiracy and five people were executed, but did not blame the crown prince.

Biden Reportedly Weighs JCPOA Return

The Biden administration seems to be attempting to patch things up with Tehran, with reports emerging on Friday that the Biden camp and the Iranian government have been in [secret talks](#) on a US return to the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal for weeks. Trump unilaterally withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, after claiming without evidence that Iran had been violating the treaty which bars the country from pursuing a nuclear weapons program or refining uranium above a certain quantity and quality in exchange for sanctions relief. When Trump withdrew, he reimposed sanctions, seriously damaging Iran's economy and hampering its ability to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Tuesday, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Tehran, which began [publicly exceeding](#) the deal's restrictions earlier this month, would [return to compliance](#) if the US were to drop the sanctions imposed by Trump.

"If these problems are solved, then we will come back to comply fully" with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Zarif said at a press conference. "We will welcome the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] inspectors just as the protocol says ... We will be ready to return to full compliance."

Biden [said last year](#) he supports a return to the deal if Iran resumed compliance with the JCPOA.

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Seniormost US Senator Patrick Leahy Hospitalized 'Out of an Abundance of Caution' After Feeling Ill
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As President pro tempore of the Senate, US Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT) is third in the presidential line of succession, after Vice President Kamala Harris and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Leahy was taken to the hospital on Tuesday evening "out of an abundance of caution" after feeling ill in his office, according to a press release. At 80 years old, he is the eldest member of the Senate.

"This evening, Senator Leahy was in his Capitol office and not feeling well. He was examined in the Capitol by the Attending Physician. Out of an abundance of caution, the Attending Physician recommended that he be taken to a hospital for observation, where he is now, and where he is being evaluated," [a spokesperson](#) for the lawmaker said.

Leahy is the oldest member of Congress and the seniormost lawmaker in the US Senate. As such, he was recently given the role of President pro tempore, in which he oversees the chamber's affairs when Vice President Kamala Harris is not presiding as its president. Among those duties is heading the [impending impeachment](#) trial of former US President Donald Trump, who was charged earlier this month with inciting the January 6 insurrection in which his supporters [stormed the Capitol](#) building and dispersed Congress in a bid to halt the election results from being certified.

Leahy is the last remaining lawmaker from the so-called "Watergate babies," a group of Democrats elected to Congress in the wake of former US President Richard Nixon's 1974 resignation as a result of the Watergate Scandal. In the past he has headed the Senate's judiciary and agriculture committees and he remains the ranking member of the Appropriations Committee. The Leahy Laws, which bar the US departments of state and defense from sending aid to the militaries of nations that routinely violate human rights, are named after him.

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Pentagon Pens Contracts for Two Hypersonic Missile Detection Satellite Prototypes
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US Space Force has plans for a vast array of detection and communications satellites to monitor events on the Earth's surface, including but not limited to detecting hypersonic weapon launches. The orbital military surveillance network could consist of up to 1,000 satellites. The Pentagon recently handed out two contracts to develop prototypes for a much-sought-after satellite that can detect hypersonic weapons.

L3Harris Technologies and Northrop Grumman have been given contracts by the Missile Defense Agency for \$122 million and \$155 million, respectively, to [develop a prototype](#) satellite for the Hypersonic and Ballistic Tracking Space Sensor (HBTSS).

The new generation of satellites will orbit much closer to the Earth than other satellites in Washington's missile detection network, due to hypersonic weapons being much harder to detect than standard ballistic missile launches, as they do not fire rocket engines for a long time before switching to 'cruise' mode and gliding toward their targets at extreme speeds.

Both China and Russia have at least one operational hypersonic weapon, which [travel at speeds](#) in excess of Mach 5, with some reportedly reaching 15,000 miles per hour, according to intelligence reports. A US hypersonic weapons program is still in development.

Existing geostationary missile detection satellites orbit at roughly 22,000 miles from the surface of the Earth, while the new satellites would be just a couple of hundred miles up. Space technically begins at an altitude of 62 miles.

According to a [Defense Department bulletin](#) on the contracts, the deals include "an on-orbit prototype demonstration, culminating with launch and early orbit testing" by July 22, 2023.

[According to C4ISRNET](#), the HBTSS satellites will pair with a parallel effort by the Space Development Agency to build hyper-sensitive tracking satellites to detect a hypersonic weapon launch. This "tracking layer" will be closer to the Earth than the HBTSS satellites, which will pick up the weapon to provide targeting data for an intercept.

L3Harris is also a major part of that project, [having been handed](#) a \$193 million contract in October 2020 to build four of the first Wide Field of View (WFOV) overhead persistent infrared (OPIR) sensor satellites. SpaceX was given a \$149.1 million contract to build another four of the same type. By comparison, the HBTSS are described as having a "medium field of view."

[Sputnik has reported](#) on the US Space Force's plans for a vast array of new space-based platforms, including numerous layers of tracking and communications satellites. Some projections suggest this could reach as many as 1,000 space-based devices - devices that would [require defending](#), and thus justify the Space Force's existence.

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DC National Guard Chief Says Pentagon Hamstrung His Ability to Command Prior to Capitol Insurrection

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The former chief of US Capitol Police said that he called the Pentagon for assistance half a dozen times as his officers lost control of the deadly insurrection outside the legislature on January 6, but was rebuffed by senior defense figures reportedly over fears of how the public would react to the move.

In the lead up to the deadly January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol, which saw five people killed, including a police officer, the Pentagon severely restricted the authority of the commander of the District of Columbia National Guard, the latter [told the Washington Post](#) on Tuesday. The revelation sheds further light on how the senior political military command hamstrung the ability of law enforcement to defend the nation's capitol against the riot.

Maj. Gen. William J. Walker, the commanding general of the District of Columbia National Guard, told the Post that he was deprived of the ability to deploy even small numbers of troops

on his own by Trump-appointed political higher-ups who feared a repeat of the June 2020 White House public relations disaster.

Helicopter Attack Draws Ire

When the national guard was called in to [suppress massive antiracist and anti-police-brutality protests](#) in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, a black man in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by white police, their heavy-handed tactics aroused fury across the nation. No incident better captured the guard's excesses than their use of a "buzzing" tactic against protesters by [hovering several helicopters](#) just feet over their heads.

Orders to perform the so-called 'persistent presence' maneuver, which is commonly used by US forces occupying Iraq and Afghanistan, came from the Pentagon, not the DC Guard, the [New York Times](#) reported. According to the paper, Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy and the Army's chief of staff, Gen. James C. McConville, pressured Walker to end the protests, in order to convince then-US President Donald Trump that active duty troops would not be needed.

'I Did Not Have That Authority'

The incident was so egregious it prompted an outcry from many, including [Human Rights Watch](#), which typically directs its ire at US enemies. As a result, Walker told the Post, he was not allowed control over even the small reserve force of 40 guardsmen on January 6, 2021, when thousands of protesters fresh from Trump's White House 'Stop the Steal' rally came crashing down upon police outside the US Capitol building, destroying public property and killing five people.

"All military commanders normally have immediate response authority to protect property, life, and in my case, federal functions - federal property and life," Walker told the Post. "But in this instance I did not have that authority."

Walker said he was required by McCarthy to submit a formal request for a "concept of operation" approval that by definition precluded the possibility of deploying National Guard units in response to an emergency.

He also noted that former Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund, who [resigned in the wake](#) of the uprising, asked beforehand if he would get National Guard support if things got out of hand.

"All he said was, 'If I call you, will you be able to help?' " Walker said. "And I said, 'Yes, but I need permission. So send a formal request,' and I never got it, until after the fact."

Sund's first panicked request arrived at 1:49 pm as Capitol police were overwhelmed by many hundreds of Trump supporters, some heavily armed.

"I am making an urgent, urgent immediate request for National Guard assistance," [Sund recalled](#) to the Post as saying at the time. "I have got to get boots on the ground."

"I told him I had to get permission from the secretary of the Army and I would send him all available guardsmen but as soon as I got permission to do so," Walker said. "I sent a message to the leadership of the Army, letting them know the request that I had received from Chief Sund."

There were further delays across the river at the Pentagon, which mulled the decision for an additional 75 minutes, later claiming that it was the Guard's fault for not preparing for rapid mobilization.

Meanwhile, Trump supporters had already breached the Capitol at several points - aided by [seemingly sympathetic elements](#) of the Capitol Police and GOP congress members themselves - and lawmakers was forced to suddenly disperse and run to safety. A subsequent analysis of

events has shown that an organized, militant faction of the violent insurrection [intended to capture, kidnap](#) and possibly kill leading members of Congress and several progressive lawmakers.

A Failed Putsch

The Trump supporters were reportedly intent on halting Congress' certification of the November 3, 2020, election, which Trump had never stopped claiming was fraudulent. Lawmakers were meeting that day to certify the results which showed US President Joe Biden as the winner, a task assigned by the US Constitution.

According to senior political Pentagon officials who [spoke with the Post](#) on the day before the riot, the absence of troops at the Capitol going into the Wednesday protest was a question of optics. One Trump appointee at the Pentagon told the paper the military had "learned its lesson" from the previous June and would be "absolutely nowhere near the Capitol building" because "we don't want to send the wrong message."

National Guard troops did not arrive at the Capitol until around 5:30 pm that evening, after Capitol Police had cleared the national legislative building of protesters and just 30 minutes before a citywide curfew ordered by DC Mayor Muriel Bowser went into effect. Five people died in the insurrection, including a police officer who was beaten to death by Trump supporters, which also resulted in widespread damage to the Capitol. The rioters failed to stop the confirmation, however and lawmakers soon reconvened and certified the election results.

Trump has since been impeached for "incitement of insurrection" - an unprecedented second impeachment of a sitting US president, but his Senate trial has not yet begun. Biden was sworn in under the watchful eye of over 25,000 US troops on January 20, who remained in the city to guard against further threats of violent right-wing action.

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Kibbles and Cannabidiol: Martha Stewart Launches CBD Pet Treat Line
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US branding icon Martha Stewart launched 'Martha Stewart CBD' in a partnership with Canopy Growth Corporation and Marquee Brands last year and recently expanded her edible wellness products into health and grocery stores nationwide.

Stewart, who turns 80 this year, revealed in a Town & Country magazine interview that the latest addition to "Martha Stewart CBD" was designed to be ingested by man's best friend. Stewart, who has two French bulldogs and two chow chows, explained that she was very hands-on for the creation of the soft-baked chews, which [are advertised](#) to "enhance physical and mental well-being."

"Even for the dogs, I chose flavors like chicken, blueberry, cranberry, they are all good and nutritious," she claimed.

Stewart, who has been revered for decades for her marketing skills, says she likes to share edibles to help her friends feel relaxed and uplifted after a meal.

"When I have guests over I serve the CBD pâtes de fruits on a silver tray at the end of a dinner, like dessert," she detailed.

However, when it's time for bed, Stewart prefers to use an eyedropper filled with CBD, or cannabidiol, oil.

"It's about relaxation for me," she explained. "I'm not a hyper person, but I'm a very active person and I don't relax easily."

CBD use has been on the rise within the US in recent years due to its calming nature and ability to treat pain, insomnia and anxiety in some individuals without causing the euphoric effects generated by THC, the primary psychoactive ingredient in marijuana.

Due to its composition, CBD products, including creams, oils and edibles, are federally legal in the US, unlike marijuana, which is currently only legal in several US states.

"THC, that's the Snoop stuff," Stewart quipped to Town & Country, speaking of her "Martha and Snoop's Potluck Dinner" co-host Snoop Dogg. "CBD, that's what is in my products."

Stewart recently announced that her edible wellness products would be available in the 580 "CBD HQ" sections of The Vitamin Shoppe.

"When I created this new line of CBD products, it was important that the assortment be delicious and elegant, but also affordable and accessible," Stewart said in a statement [published by Forbes](#) last month. "It is easier than ever to treat yourself and your loved ones to the wellness benefits of CBD."

While most folks have not purchased Stewart's CBD products, that did not stop netizens from expressing their opinions on her brand and on CBD use in general.

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ANALYSIS - US-Russian Relations Unlikely to Improve Despite New START Extension

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US national security establishment, obsessed with global hegemony, will not allow the Biden administration to improve relations with Russia despite the extension of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), experts and a former high-level American government official told Sputnik.

Earlier on Tuesday, the White House said President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin during a phone call discussed both countries' willingness to extend New START for five years and agreed to have their teams work to complete the extension by the February 5 deadline.

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

RELATIONS TO SLIDE AMID US BID FOR HEGEMONY

The Kremlin in a readout after the call said that Putin congratulated Biden on the beginning of his work as US president and noted that the normalization of relations between Russia and the

United States would meet the interests of both countries and, given their special responsibility for maintaining security and stability in the world, the entire international community.

"Putin is correct that a normalization of relations between the US and Russia is in the interests of both countries and that of the entire world," former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik. "The Kremlin needs to understand that the US military/security complex requires Russia as an enemy in order to justify its budget and power. Therefore, there can be no normalization."

He pointed out as a reminder that former President Donald Trump wanted to normalize ties between the two countries but failed for these very reasons.

"It was this goal that caused the US military/security complex to orchestrate the Russiagate hoax in order to prevent any such normalization," Roberts said. "By investigating Trump for three years as a Russian agent, Trump was unable to normalize relations without confirming the propaganda that he was acting in Russia's interest."

Russia House Director Edward Lozansky believes Biden was easily able to agree to extend the treaty because - unlike Trump - nobody would accuse the former vice president of being a Russian sympathizer.

Moreover, Lozansky added, the treaty is in the best interests of the United States and its European allies who want the pact to be extended. However, relations will unlikely improve if the United States continues to insist on dominating the globe, he added.

"The most important thing is to see if he [Biden] continues to claim God's given right to America to keep the world's hegemony with the place at the head of the geopolitical table," Lozansky told Sputnik. "If he does, the US-Russia relations will continue to slide even further down since neither Russia nor China would accept such hegemony."

ACCUSATIONS WITHOUT EVIDENCE

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki in a press briefing on Tuesday said Biden also made clear during the conversation that the US will counter so-called malign Russian activities. The Biden administration has accused Russia of hacking major US networks, election meddling, along with the poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny – allegations which Moscow has repeatedly refuted. Experts believe these allegations are also an effort to ensure relations do not improve between the two countries.

Vice President of the Eurasia Center Earl Rasmussen expressed concerns that Washington often begins accusing Russia of different violations even without having reliable facts.

"Most likely, the most productive part of the discussion may have been the Arms Treaty, which in my perspective is the most important," Rasmussen told Sputnik. "The other talking points seem to be political and geared toward the American audience. For the most part, those accusations are without evidence."

Rasmussen also said, based on recent foreign policy cabinet nominations in the Biden administration, he expects a further deterioration in US-Russian relations.

Roberts said a big part of the problem is Washington's lack of respect for Moscow, pointing to the recent American allegations and the sanctioning of Russian businessman and government officials. The former US official also noted how Washington seized Russian consulates and property for no other reason than an intentional provocation.

"Endless derogatory remarks are made about President Putin. Washington overthrew the Ukrainian government and installed its own, causing Russia problems with the EU and Ukraine.

Washington interfered in Belarus. Recently House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Hillary Clinton said that Putin had ordered Trump to have his supporters storm the Capitol," Roberts said. As far as Navalny goes, Roberts said the Kremlin by all means should "cease permitting Washington to finance a fifth column inside Russia."

On Saturday, multiple unauthorized protests took place in various regions of Russia, instigated by supporters of Navalny.

"Navalny and his supporters are Washington's agents," Roberts said. "They make propaganda inside Russia that Washington and NATO exploit outside Russia."

Until Washington respects the Russian government, he added, Moscow cannot negotiate on equal terms.

"It is dangerous for Washington to disrespect the Russian government," Roberts said. "It could result in Washington miscalculating and provoking a war."

Roberts suggested that Russia could gain respect with more aggressive responses to Washington's accusations and provocations.

"A very visible mutual defense treaty between Russia, China, and Iran would sober Washington considerably," Roberts concluded.

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Yellen Says Working Toward Addressing K-Shaped US Economic Recovery After COVID-19

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said she was working toward addressing a K-shaped recovery of the US economy expected to take place after the coronavirus pandemic.

"People worry about a K-shaped recovery to the pandemic -and that is a cause for concern - but long before COVID-19 infected a single individual, we were living in a K-shaped economy, one where wealth built on wealth while certain segments of the population fell further and further behind," Yellen said in her first message to staff at the Treasury Department on Tuesday. "I believe our Department can play a major role in addressing each of these crises."

A K-shaped recovery occurs when, following a recession, different parts of the economy recover at different rates, times or magnitudes. This is in contrast to an even, uniform recovery across sectors, industries or groups of people.

The US economy shrank 5 percent in the first quarter of last year and 31.4 percent in the subsequent three months, as businesses shut down during the height of the pandemic and struggled to stay open later. Third quarter GDP rebounded 33.1 percent, with fourth-quarter data not published yet.

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US Senator Presiding Over Trump Impeachment Trial Taken to Hospital - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Senator Patrick Leahy, who is assigned to oversee former President Donald Trump's second impeachment trial, has been taken to the hospital after he became ill, his spokesperson David Carle said in a statement.

"This evening, Senator Leahy was in his Capitol office and was not feeling well," Carle said in the statement on Tuesday. "He was examined in the Capitol by the Attending Physician. Out of an abundance of caution, the Attending Physician recommended that he be taken to a local hospital for observation, where he is now, and where he is being evaluated."

On Tuesday afternoon, Leahy was in the Senate chamber to be sworn in as the presiding officer of the Trump impeachment trial.

The impeachment trial arguments are set to begin February 9.

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Majority of Canadians Favor Moving Past Keystone XL Decision Onto Other US Issues – Poll

TORONTO, January 26 (Sputnik) - The majority of Canadians are in favor of moving past the Keystone XL pipeline extension cancellation decision to pursue other priorities in its bilateral relationship with the United States, an Angus Reid Institute poll revealed.

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.

"If it were up to them, three-in-five Canadians (59%) say they would accept the cancellation and focus on other priorities in Canada-US relations. The number that share this view is highest in Quebec, where three-quarters would do so," the study said on Tuesday.

Despite this majority, most Canadians were in agreement that Biden's decision is bad for their country - 52 percent - and especially bad for Alberta - 65 percent.

However, there was discord in how Canadians perceive the Keystone XL pipeline; 51 percent of Canadians stated that jobs and the economy have to take precedent over climate change and the environment, while 49 percent said opposite.

Canada's leader Justin Trudeau has expressed his disappointment with Biden's decision but his government is showing signs of moving forward bilateral relations. On Saturday, Canada's Ambassador to the US said that Ottawa will be "moving forward" from the Keystone XL to other priorities with the Biden administration.

Meanwhile, this approach is receiving pushback from some provincial premiers who have expressed a desire to see a tougher response to Biden's decision.

Premier Jason Kenney of Alberta has urged Trudeau to impose proportionate economic consequences on the United States for revoking the permit or, at the very least, seek compensation and says that the revocation is a clear violation of the investor-protection provisions in the US-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA).

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.

In September, the US Supreme Court rejected a request from the Trump administration and the pipeline's parent company, 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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Two Men Extradited From Australia to US on \$50Mln Text Message Racket - Justice Dept

NEW YORK, January 26 (Sputnik) - Two men have been extradited from Australia to the United States on charges of bilking hundreds of thousands of Americans out of more than \$50 million in unwanted text messaging services, the US Justice Department said in a news release.

Michael Pearce, an Australian national, and Yongchao Liu, a Chinese national also known as Kevin Liu and residing in Australia, arrived in the United States on Monday, the release said on Tuesday.

The men "victimized hundreds of thousands of mobile phone customers to the tune of more than \$50 million", sending them unsolicited text messages through a practice called "auto-subscribing," the release added.

According to the complaint, Pearce and Liu worked for a company called Bullroarer, which was affiliated with another entity called Tatto that was involved in the racket.

To carry out their scheme, they "purchased" large numbers of mobile phone numbers from co-conspirators at US-based Mobile Messenger.

"Pearce, Liu and their co-conspirators then worked to have unsolicited text messages sent to these and other mobile phone numbers and to enroll those customers in premium text messaging services without their knowledge or consent," the release said, adding that the messages covered topics like horoscopes, celebrity gossip and trivia facts.

If convicted, the two could face a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison, according to the release.

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UN Report Accuses Yemen Government of Money Laundering, Houthis of Diverting State Revenue

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The government of Yemen implemented a sophisticated money laundering scheme and was involved in corruption, while the rebel Houthi movement

diverted some \$1.8 billion of the state money, the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen said in a new report seen by Sputnik.

According to the report, in January 2018, Saudi Arabia, under its development and reconstruction program, deposited \$2 billion with the Central Bank of Yemen. The funds were provided to fund letter of credit, as well as such purchase such items as rice, sugar, milk, wheat and flour to strengthen food security and stabilize domestic prices.

"The Government of Yemen implemented a scheme to divert funds from the Saudi deposit, in which \$423 million of public money was illegally transferred to traders," the report said on Tuesday.

The report revealed that the Central Bank of Yemen broke its foreign exchange rules, manipulated the foreign exchange market and laundered a substantial part of the Saudi deposit at the expense of the Yemeni population.

"The Panel views this case as an act of money- laundering and corruption perpetrated by government institutions, in this case the Central Bank of Yemen and the Government of Yemen," the report said.

It also found that the Houthis performed functions that are exclusively within the authority of Yemen's government. In 2019, the rebels diverted \$1.8 billion from the government through the collection of taxes and other state revenue, a large portion of which was used to fund their war effort.

Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthi rebels since 2014.

The Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates launched an operation to support the internationally recognized government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in 2015. The Houthis continue to maintain control over the vast north of the country, including the capital Sanaa.

The United Nations considers Yemen the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with more than 80 percent of the population, or 24.1 million people, in need of humanitarian assistance.

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Austin, Australian Defense Minister Confirm Cooperation on Key Priorities - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - New US Secretary of Defense and Australian Minister of Defense Linda Reynolds have confirmed continuing close cooperation on agreed defense priorities and in maintaining security in the Indo-Pacific region, Department of Defense Press Secretary John Kirby said in a readout.

"Secretary Austin and Minister Reynolds committed to sustain progress on Alliance priorities, including outcomes from the 2020 Australia-US Ministerial (AUSMIN) meeting," Kirby said on Tuesday. "They reiterated their support for like-minded approaches to address security challenges throughout the Indo-Pacific region."

The two defense ministers also reaffirmed the enduring strength of the US-Australia Alliance, Kirby said.

"Secretary Austin and Minister Reynolds acknowledged the close alignment in both nations' perspectives and priorities in addressing pressing regional and global security concerns," Kirby said.

Austin also emphasized the importance of maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific, founded on existing international law and norms in a region free of malign behavior, Kirby added.

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Biden Administration to Review Trump's Sanctions on ICC Officials - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will review the sanctions imposed on International Criminal Court (ICC) officials by the previous Trump administration, a US State Department spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

"Much as we disagree with the ICC's actions relating to the Afghanistan and Israeli/Palestinian situations, the sanctions will be thoroughly reviewed as we determine our next steps," the spokesperson said on Tuesday.

Last March, the ICC authorized the commencement of an investigation into alleged war crimes committed by parties to the conflict in Afghanistan, including an investigation of US personnel. In December 2019, ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, who is also the key prosecutor in the Afghanistan investigation, said that there was enough evidence to open a probe into alleged Israeli war crimes in Palestine.

In response, on June 11, 2020, then-President Donald Trump issued an executive order authorizing sanctions against ICC officials.

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US Defense Secretary Discusses Security Challenges in First Call With Canada Counterpart
WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Newly confirmed US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin discussed the COVID-19 pandemic and shared global security challenges in the first call with Canadian counterpart Harjit Sajjan, a readout of the conversation said.

"The leaders discussed the many global security challenges we face including COVID-19, security concerns on the North American continent, and the collective challenges to a free and open rules-based international order," the readout said on Tuesday.

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Ex-Canadian Finance Minister Who Resigned Amid Scandal Exits OECD General Secretary Race

TORONTO, January 26 (Sputnik) - Bill Morneau, Canada's former Finance Minister who resigned in the wake of the WE Charity scandal, announced in a statement that he is withdrawing from the race to become the next Secretary-General of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

"I have decided to withdraw from the race to become the next Secretary-General of the OECD, as I do not have support from enough members to continue to the third round of the campaign," Morneau said on Tuesday.

Morneau said he was proud to have raised issues important to Canadians - the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the fight against climate change - before an international audience and extended his best wishes to the rest of the candidates left.

When Morneau announced his resignation in the middle of August, he said that his decision was motivated by an earlier decision not to run in the next election and that the country needed a Finance Minister that would oversee the long-term economic recovery in the aftermath of the pandemic-induced downturn. He said at the time that his focus was the OECD's Secretary-General position.

Morneau's OSCE bid was backed by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Trudeau and Morneau were the subject of intense backlash after multiple investigative pieces revealed close ties between their families and the WE Charity, which was awarded a \$670-million sole-source contract to administer a government-sponsored student volunteer program. Morneau had faced additional criticism following his admission that he accepted expense paid trips from the WE Charity.

Trudeau and Morneau were both the subjects of a conflict of interest probe by the Canada's Ethics Commissioner into their relationship with the embattled charity, although Morneau's probe was dropped in October. The ethics probe was the third for both officials during their five years in office.

The search for a new Secretary-General to replace the outgoing Angel Gurría is expected to conclude by the beginning of March. The candidate chosen by the OECD Council will begin their five-year term on June 1.

Australia's former finance minister, Mathias Cormann, is the perceived front-runner in the race, in a field that has shrunk to five candidates.

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Biden Administration Rescinds Trump's Family Separation Immigration Policy - Memorandum

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US acting Attorney General Monty Wilkinson has terminated the Trump administration's so-called zero tolerance immigration policy that was responsible for separating thousands of migrant families that entered the United States illegally, a memorandum revealed.

"I am rescinding - effective immediately - the policy directive entitled Zero-Tolerance for Offenses Under 8 USC 1325(a) (April 6, 2018)," Wilkinson said in the memorandum on Tuesday.

In 2018, former US Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the United States had adopted a "zero tolerance policy" for immigration offenses that required prosecution of all illegal entry referrals at the southwest border including misdemeanors and regardless if the migrant adult was with a family unit.

More than 1,000 migrant families were separated in 2017 under the so-called zero-tolerance policy.

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Biden Will Purchase Extra 200Mln Vaccine Doses to Reach 600Mln by Summer - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is working to purchase additional 200 million more doses of COVID-19 vaccines to reach 600 million doses this summer and vaccinate 300 million people, the White House said in a press release.

"The Biden-Harris administration is working to purchase an additional 100 million doses of each of the two Food and Drug Administration-authorized vaccines - Pfizer and Moderna," the release said on Tuesday. "This increase the total vaccine order for the US by 50 percent, from 400 million to 600 million with these additional doses expected to deliver this summer."

The release pointed out that the additional doses would enable the United States to fully vaccinate 300 million Americans by the end of summer.

Earlier in the day, President Joe Biden announced that further measures would be undertaken to ramp up the vaccination campaign, including greater and more predictable supplies to the states.

"After review of current vaccines supplies and manufacturing plans I can announce that we will increase overall weekly vaccination distributions to states, tribes and territories from 8.6 million doses to a minimum of 10 million doses starting next week," Biden said during a White House press briefing.

An increase of 1.4 million doses per week will allow millions of more Americans to get vaccinated sooner than previously expected, he said.

Biden also promised to provide states with a reliable three-week forecast of supplies to allow them to better plan their vaccination efforts.

"Until we had to guess how much vaccine to expect for the next week and that's what the governors had to do. This is unacceptable. Lives are at stake here," he added.

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US Marines Complete 3rd Live-Fire Training Session With UAE Presidential Guard in 6 Months

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Marines in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) recently finished live-fire training with the nation's Presidential Guard, US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a press release.

"This training marks the third iteration of bilateral live-fire training in six months, demonstrating the strength and mutual respect between the two partner forces," the release said on Tuesday. The latest exercise featured 60mm mortar systems, snipers and small unit tactics, the release added.

A US Marine Corps Training Mission in the UAE advises and trains the Presidential Guard, a crisis response force, on counterterrorism operations and protection of critical infrastructure, according to the release.

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US Pharmacist Admits Attempt to Destroy Hundreds of COVID-19 Vaccine Doses - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - A pharmacist in the US state of Wisconsin pleaded guilty to charges he attempted to make hundreds of COVID-19 vaccine doses ineffective by deliberately removing vials from a storage freezer, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"While working as a hospital pharmacist in Grafton, Wisconsin, on two successive overnight shifts in late December, [Steven] Brandenburg purposefully removed a box of COVID-19 vaccine vials manufactured by Moderna - which must be stored at specific cold temperatures to remain viable - from the hospital's refrigeration unit intending to render the vaccines inert and no longer effective," the release said on Tuesday.

After leaving the vaccines out for several hours each night, Brandenburg returned the vaccines to the freezer to be used in the hospital's vaccine clinic the following day. Before the full extent

of Brandenburg's conduct was discovered, 57 people received doses of the vaccine from these vials, the release said.

Brandenburg said that he was skeptical of vaccines in general and the Moderna vaccine specifically - beliefs he had expressed to coworkers for the past two years, the release added. Brandenburg faced two charges of tampering with consumer products to threaten others with death or bodily injury. Each count carries a maximum sentence of ten years in jail, according to the release.

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Vice President Harris Gets 2nd COVID-19 Vaccine Dose, Urges Everyone to Do Likewise

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris took her second dose of the coronavirus vaccine in a televised setting at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and urged Americans to get vaccinated.

"I want to urge everyone to take the vaccine when it is your turn," Harris told CSPAN viewers on Tuesday. "It will save your life."

Harris received her first vaccine dose on December 29.

Following a slow roll-out after two coronavirus vaccines received emergency approval in December, the United States administered more than 1 million shots daily for the past week. President Joe Biden has said the goal of his administration is to vaccinate 100 million Americans in the first 100 days of his presidency.

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US 'Import Alert' Targets Hand Sanitizer From Mexico for Toxic Chemicals - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US government authorized the customs officials to seize shipments of hand sanitizer made in Mexico after finding more than half of samples in a recent examination contained toxic ingredients, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said in a press release.

"The agency has placed all alcohol-based hand sanitizers from Mexico on a countrywide import alert to help stop products that appear to be in violation from entering the US until the agency is able to review the products' safety," the release said on Tuesday.

The decision followed an examination of 112 samples of alcohol-based hand sanitizer products from 53 different Mexican manufacturers. Of 94 samples judged to be deficient, 74 had excessive levels of methanol and/or 1-propanol - two poisonous types of alcohol that can be absorbed through skin, the release said.

"This presents serious safety concerns, as the FDA is aware of at least 20 recent deaths associated with hand sanitizers, 16 of which involved methanol poisoning. Moreover, seven of these cases were directly linked to hand sanitizers manufactured in Mexico," the release said.

Another 20 samples had insufficient levels of active ingredient – non-poisonous ethyl alcohol - to be effective,” the release added.

The import alert allows inspectors to seize shipments of Mexican sanitizer from companies that fail to qualify for an FDA certified “Green List” of manufacturers that meet US requirements. Hand sanitizers are regulated in the United States as non-prescription drugs for external use, according to the release.

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The release added that with the additional doses the United States will have enough vaccines to fully vaccinate 300 million Americans by the end of the summer.

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Trump Impeachment Trial Underway, Arguments to Begin February 9

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US Senate formally opened the second impeachment trial for former President Donald Trump on Tuesday with the swearing-in of Senate President Pro-Tempore Patrick Leahy to preside over the process and the swearing-in of the senators to serve as jurors.

On Monday, the House of Representatives delivered the article of impeachment against Trump, accusing him of inciting an insurrection at the US Capitol building on January 6 to stop Congress from verifying President Joe Biden's win in the 2020 election.

The impeachment trial arguments will begin on February 9.

After the swearing-in of senators, the Senate rejected Republican Senator Rand Paul's attempt to declare the Trump impeachment trial unconstitutional.

The Senate voted 55-45 to block Paul's constitutional point of order.

Paul said in a statement the vote count shows Trump will be acquitted in the impeachment trial.

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New START Extension Should Be Just Beginning of US-Russian Disarmament Diplomacy - NGO

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - An agreement on prolonging the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) should be just the start and not the finish of US-Russian nuclear disarmament diplomacy, the US Arms Control Association said in a statement. Earlier, the White House said President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin during a phone call discussed both countries' willingness to extend New START for five years and agreed to have their teams work to complete the extension by the February 5 deadline. "New START extension should be just the beginning and not the end of US and Russian nuclear disarmament diplomacy," the release said on Tuesday. "A key objective of the next round of bilateral talks should be, in part, deeper verifiable cuts in deployed strategic nuclear weapons."

US-Russian follow-on talks, the release added, should address nonstrategic nuclear weapons along with long-range, dual-capable conventional missiles, including those formerly banned by the INF Treaty.

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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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) -

IMF WORLD ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in a report on Tuesday upgraded the forecast for Russia's economic growth this year by 0.2 percentage points to 3 percent as the launch of vaccination programs worldwide is expected to boost economic activities.

* IMF upgraded the forecast for the simple average of oil prices this year by \$3.30 per barrel to \$50.03 per barrel, as demand is expected to grow after suffering a huge contraction in 2020.

* The steps China took to successfully contain the novel coronavirus pandemic allowed Beijing to quickly restore the economy, IMF Economic Counselor Gita Gopinath told reporters.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden during their phone call on Tuesday agreed to examine strategic stability talks on a number of arms control and security matters, the White House said in a statement.

* The Russian parliament's lower house will consider the draft agreement on the extension of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) at a plenary session on Wednesday, Leonid Slutsky, the head of the State Duma International Affairs Committee.

* Noticeable progress is visible in the situation around the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), there are reasons to expect its extension soon, Russian Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov said.

* Russia and the United States are actively engaged in negotiations on extending the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty, which expires on February 5, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

US CONGRESS

* The US Senate on Tuesday confirmed Antony Blinken to be the next Secretary of State.

* The US Senate on Tuesday rejected Republican Senator Rand Paul's attempt to declare the Trump impeachment trial unconstitutional.

PROTESTS IN RUSSIA

* The Russian Investigative Committee said on Tuesday that its chief, Alexander Bastrykin, had been informed about 20 criminal cases initiated as a result of uncoordinated rallies on January 23.

* Every incident with reporters at January 23 unauthorized rallies must be viewed separately as it can be difficult to detect a media professional amid protesters' aggression, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

US POLICY ON MIDDLE EAST

* The administration of President Joe Biden will support a mutually-agreed two-state solution embracing Israel living in peace and security with a viable Palestinian state, US Acting Permanent Representative to the United Nations Richard Mills told the UN Security Council on Tuesday.

* Biden will restore humanitarian assistance programs for the Palestinian people and will take steps to reopen diplomatic missions that were closed by his predecessor Donald Trump, Mills said.

LAVROV-ZARIF TALKS

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Tuesday he discussed with his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the construction of new blocks of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant.

* Russia and Iran signed on Tuesday an agreement on cooperation in information security, which is expected to contribute to strengthening coordination in the face of the growing cyberspace challenges, Lavrov said.

* Russia hopes that the United States will return to the JCPOA, paving way for deal implementation by Iran, Lavrov said.

* Tehran will resume full compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) if Washington lifts sanctions that currently hinder Iran's cooperation with foreign countries, Zarif said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

* Iran has approved Russia's Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus and hopes to start joint production soon, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said.

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Biden Administration Supports Peaceful Transition in Venezuela - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The administration of US President Joe Biden will press for a peaceful and democratic transition of power through elections in Venezuela, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"The overriding goal of the United States is to support a peaceful, democratic transition in Venezuela through free and fair elections," Psaki said.

Psaki added that the Biden administration will pay particular attention to the ongoing humanitarian crisis unfolding in Venezuela, while convening an international effort to press for democratic reform and to hold those engaged in corrupt or otherwise illegal activities to account. Venezuela is in the midst of a political quagmire, which began in 2019 after Juan Guaido, then head of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, proclaimed himself an interim president of Venezuela in a bid to oust reelected President Nicolas Maduro from power.

Tensions between the United States and Venezuela reached new heights after the United States, under former US President Donald Trump, recognized Guaido as the president of Venezuela. The Trump administration also imposed several rounds of devastating sanctions against the South American country.

Russia, China and a host of other nations recognize Maduro as the only legitimate leader of the country.

Caracas has expressed hope that relations would normalize under the newly inaugurated Biden administration. However, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during Senate confirmation hearings that the US should not change its position regarding Guaido as the interim leader of Venezuela.

Venezuelan international analyst Laila Tajeldine told Sputnik the new US administration will continue the policy of the previous government toward Venezuela and will strengthen its measures against the Latin American nation.

UN experts have said US sanctions on Venezuela violate international law. Renowned economist Jeffrey Sachs in a report argued that US sanctions have caused significant starvation and negatively affected medical care in Venezuela.

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Senate Rejects Attempt to Halt Trump Impeachment on Constitutional Grounds

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Tuesday rejected Republican Senator Rand Paul's attempt to declare the Trump impeachment trial unconstitutional. The Senate voted 55-45 to block Paul's constitutional point of order. Paul in a statement said the vote count shows former President Donald Trump will be acquitted in this impeachment trial.

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White House Confirms Biden, Putin Discussed Extension of New START Treaty

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the extension of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) as well as other bilateral issues, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"[Biden] called President Putin this afternoon with the intention of discussing our willingness to extend New Start for five years," Psaki said.

The two leaders agreed to have negotiations expedited in order to complete the extension by February 5, a readout of the conversation said. Furthermore, Biden and Putin agreed to pursue strategic stability dialogue on a range of arms control and emerging security issues.

The presidents also covered the ongoing turmoil in Ukraine as well as the SolarWinds security breach, alleged bounties on the US soldiers in Afghanistan, alleged interference in the 2020 election and the poisoning of Alexey Navalny, all of which Washington has blamed on Moscow. Russian officials have vigorously denied each of the allegations.

Biden also made clear during the conversation that the US will act firmly in the defense of its national interests and will counter malign Russian activities and called for those detained during the unruly and unauthorized protests on Saturday to be released, Psaki added.

Moscow has condemned US statements about Saturday's rallies as interference in its sovereign affairs.

Biden and Putin were in agreement about the need for transparent and consistent communication going forward, the readout said.

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US Judge Blocks Biden's 100-Day Deportation Freeze - Order

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has blocked President Joe Biden's directive to temporarily pause all deportations, a court document revealed on Tuesday.

"The Court finds that Texas has satisfied the requirements for a TRO [Temporary Restraining Order]. Accordingly, Texas's Emergency Application for a TRO is GRANTED," Judge Drew Tipton said in the order.

Biden signed an executive order hours after his inauguration to temporarily pause deportations of illegal immigrants that were already subject to being removed.

The state of Texas had filed a lawsuit seeking a temporary restraining order to block the administration's 100-day pause of deportations of illegal immigrants, arguing that it violates the law.

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US Senators, Presiding Officer Sworn-In For Trump's Second Impeachment Trial

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US Senate formally opened the second impeachment trial for former President Donald Trump on Tuesday with the swearing-in of Senate President Pro Tempore Patrick Leahy to preside over the process and the swearing-in of the senators to serve as jurors.

On Monday, the House of Representatives delivered the article of impeachment against Trump, which accuses him of inciting an insurrection at the US Capitol building on January 6 to stop Congress from verifying President Joe Biden's win in the 2020 election.

US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said last week that Trump's impeachment trial is scheduled to begin the week of February 8.

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Biden Signs Executive Orders to Combat Racism, Promote Equality

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed on Tuesday several executive orders to combat systemic racism in various fields and promised to make equity and justice part of his administration's daily routine.

"We need to make equity and justice part of what we do everyday. Today, tomorrow and everyday," Biden said during a signing ceremony. "I am not promising that we can end it tomorrow, but I promise you we are going to continue to make progress to eliminate systemic racism in every branch of the White House. And the federal government will be part of that effort."

A memorandum for the Department of Housing and Urban Development directs redressing "our nation's and the federal government's history of discriminatory housing practices and policies." According to media reports, the memorandum specifically addresses some of former President Donald Trump's policies, including a move that made it harder for plaintiffs to prove unintentional discrimination.

Another Biden executive action reaffirms the federal government's commitment to the sovereignty of tribal governments. In a separate document President also directed all agencies

to condemn and combat "racism, xenophobia and intolerance against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States."

He also signed an executive order eliminating the use of privately-operated prisons.

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Biden Says US Voting Rights Act Needs to Be Restored, Expanded

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Tuesday that the United States must revive and expand the voting rights act.

"We need to restore and expand the voting rights act... and continue to fight back against laws in many states engaged to suppress the right to vote while expanding access to the ballot box for all eligible voters," Biden said.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 requires US states to map districts in order to ensure that minority voters make up enough of a district to elect their chosen representatives. It also required Justice Department approval of any changes in voting laws and procedures in Southern US States with a history of preventing African-Americans from casting ballots. On August 6, 1965, alongside Marlin Luther King and other civil rights leaders, US President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act which was designed to remove legal barriers across every state in the Union that prevented blacks from exercising their constitutional right to vote.

The move came at the height of the US Civil Rights Movement, the culmination of years of enduring brutality and demonstrations against racist policies in the southern states that deprived blacks of the right to vote as stipulated by the 15th Amendment, which was ratified in 1870.

The majority opinion of the Supreme Court in the 2013 *Shelby v. Holder* case argued that the 1965 Voting Rights Act was based on information that was four decades old and violated the principle of federalism and the equal sovereignty of each US state.

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White House Says Biden, Putin Agreed to Explore Strategic Stability Discussions

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden during their phone call on Tuesday agreed to examine strategic stability talks on a number of arms control and security matters, the White House said in a statement.

"They discussed both countries' willingness to extend New START for five years, agreeing to have their teams work urgently to complete the extension by February 5," the readout said.

"They also agreed to explore strategic stability discussions on a range of arms control and emerging security issues."

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Biden Signs Executive Order to Stop Justice Department Use of Private Prisons

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Tuesday signed an executive order to bar the Department of Justice from renewing any contracts with private prisons.

"The Executive Order directs the Attorney General to decline to renew contracts with privately operated criminal facilities, a step we started to take at the end of the [President Barack] Obama administration and was reversed under the previous administration," Biden said in his remarks prior to signing the order.

Biden described the order as the first step to stop corporations from profiting off less humane and less safe incarceration.

"It is just the beginning of my administration's plan to address systemic problems in our criminal justice system," Biden added.

According to the Corporate Accountability Lab, more than 4,100 companies profit from mass incarceration in the United States. In 2017, two private prison companies, Geo Group and CoreCivic, combined won nearly \$1 billion worth of US federal government business.

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G7 Foreign Ministers Condemn Arrest of Russian Opposition Figure Navalny - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The foreign ministers of the Group of Seven (G7) countries on Tuesday said in a joint statement that they condemn the arrest of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

"We, the G7 Foreign Ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America and the High Representative of the European Union, are united in condemning the politically motivated arrest and detention of Alexey Navalny," the statement said.

On Saturday, multiple unauthorized protests took place in various regions of Russia instigated by supporters of Navalny. Both the Russian Interior Ministry and Prosecutor General's Office warned that persons participating in the events would be liable for prosecution.

The G7 foreign ministers expressed concern over the detention of participants in the protest rallies and urged Russian authorities to release them.

"The violent suppression by police forces of the right of individuals to express their opinion is unacceptable. These events confirm a continuous negative pattern of shrinking space for the opposition, civil society, human rights defenders and independent voices in Russia," they said. The G7 ministers urged Russia to fulfill its international obligations and release Navalny immediately as well as investigate the alleged attempt to poison Navalny in August.

"G7 Foreign Ministers recall their condemnation, in the strongest possible terms, of the poisoning of Mr. Navalny in August 2020 with a chemical nerve-agent of the 'Novichok' group, a substance developed by Russia," the statement said.

The G7 promised to monitor Russia's response on situation with Navalny, it added.

On January 18, a Moscow court sentenced Navalny to 30 days in prison for violating the probation terms of his suspended sentence on fraud charges.

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US Emergency Agency Earmarks \$467Mln for New York to Offset COVID-19 Vaccination Costs

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - New York will receive nearly a half-billion dollars to help cover costs of administering COVID-19 vaccines, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said in a press release on Tuesday.

"The award provides \$202,056,000.00 in federal funding to the City of New York Office of Management and Budget and \$264,744,000 to the New York State Division of Budget to reimburse costs associated with emergency protective measures taken by the state to store, handle, transport, distribute and administer vaccines to reduce the spread the of the virus," the release said.

FEMA issues grants to help communities recover from disasters, with the coronavirus pandemic now included along with typical calamities such as earthquakes, floods and wildfires that are traditionally associated with the agency.

FEMA also awarded \$76.6 million to the US territory of Puerto Rico, \$216 million to the state of New Jersey and \$2.5 million to the US Virgin Islands to help cover vaccination costs.

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Biden Believes Nord Stream 2 'Bad Deal' for Europe - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden considers the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project to be a poor deal for Europe, White House Press Secretary Jan Psaki said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"The president continues to believe that Nord Stream 2 is a bad deal for Europe," Psaki said of the a joint project between Russia's Gazprom and several European energy giants.

Nord Stream 2 is a planned 745-mile-long twin pipeline that will carry nearly 2 trillion cubic feet of gas annually from Russia to Germany.

The United States is a vocal opponent as it seeks to export more liquefied natural gas to Europe. Construction was suspended a year ago after US sanctions forced Swiss offshore pipeline company Allseas to withdraw from the project, but resumed in December and is expected to take several months to complete.

The German authorities, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, have repeatedly rejected the US extraterritorial sanctions and said they consider Nord Stream 2 to be an economic rather than political project.

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Biden Discusses Russia, Middle East in Telephone Call With NATO Chief - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in a call with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg discussed his intent to work with US allies on mutual security matters including Russia, Iraq and Afghanistan, the White House said in a readout on Tuesday.

"The President thanked the Secretary General for his steadfast leadership of the Alliance, and conveyed his intention to consult and work with allies on the full range of shared security concerns, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Russia," the readout said.

Both leaders also discussed the US commitment to collective defense and strengthening transatlantic security, the readout said.

Biden also discussed the importance of global health security and capabilities to strengthen deterrence and counter emerging threats like climate change.

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Biden to Speak to Governors on COVID-19 Vaccine Supply Later on Tuesday - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will speak to the public about the COVID-19 vaccine supply later on Tuesday and will separately update the governors of US states on the issue, White House Press Secretary Jan Psaki told reporters during a press briefing.

Psaki noted that the Biden administration has been working around the clock to make progress on vaccinating as many Americans as possible.

"Increasing the vaccine supply and building increased cooperation between the federal government and state and local leaders on the ground is key to getting that done. The President will speak later today on those efforts and will provide an update on his team's work to bolster the vaccine supply available so that we in turn can get more shots into Americans arms as quickly as possible," Psaki said. "I'll also add as many of you have reported there are some calls this afternoon with governors to brief them on these plans and get them an update on how we will continue to work together even more efficiently."

Several vaccine makers, including Pfizer and AstraZeneca, have recently run into production difficulties and had to reduce deliveries of the COVID-19 vaccine. Countries in Europe and North America were most affected by the delays.

Upon being inaugurated on January 20, Biden signed a number of executive orders reversing the key policies of former President Donald Trump, including those concerning the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the first executive orders Biden signed was to rejoin the United States to the World Health Organization and support its global vaccine initiative COVAX.

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UN Chief to Get Vaccinated Against COVID-19 Thursday in New York - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will receive his first shot of the COVID-19 vaccine on Thursday in New York City, his spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"He is still scheduled to do it in the late afternoon on Thursday," Dujarric said when asked about Guterres' plans in terms of receiving the shot. "It's being done in one of the many centers established by the City of New York. He will go there and get his shot, wait in line and wait for his turn, like everyone else in his category."

Guterres, 71, said earlier in the month that he will rely on New York City health authorities to receive the coronavirus vaccine.

On January 11, New York City began Phase 1b of its vaccination distribution plan which aims to vaccinate people ages 65 and older, among other groups.

Dujarric also said that a UN TV videographer and a photographer will be present at the site to capture the moment of Guterres receiving the vaccine.

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Biden to Order End of US Reliance on Private Prisons - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will sign on Tuesday an executive order to bar the Department of Justice from renewing any contracts with private prisons, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters.

"He will also sign an executive order directing the Department of Justice not to renew any contracts with private prisons," Psaki said during a daily press briefing.

She accused private prisons of "profiteering off" federal inmates and said they were proven less safe both for correctional officers and prisoners.

"President Biden is committed to reducing mass incarceration while making our communities safer," Psaki said.

She described the executive order, ending the federal government reliance on private prisons, as the first step towards that goal.

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Biden Administration to Review US Measures Against Nord Stream 2 Pipeline - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's administration will review the restrictive measures taken by their predecessors against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, White House Press Secretary Jan Psaki told reporters in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We are aware that the previous administration imposed new restrictions on activities related to the pipeline under the National Defense Authorization Act, and we will be reviewing those measures," Psaki said. "And so, he [Biden] looks forward to continuing to consult with our European partners on this issue"

During President Donald Trump's final full day in office, the Department of the Treasury announced that sanctions would be levied against the Russian pipe-laying vessel Fortuna and its owner, KVT-Rus. One day later, incoming Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the Biden administration is seeking to convince European states to withdraw from the Nord Stream 2 project.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that the latest round of sanctions on the pipeline project indicates that the US has "blatant disregard" for the norms of free competition and free trade.

The German authorities, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, have repeatedly rejected what they call US extraterritorial sanctions, saying that they consider the project to be economic and not political.

Nord Stream 2, a joint project between Russia's Gazprom and several European energy giants, is a planned 745-mile-long twin pipeline that will carry nearly 2 trillion cubic feet of gas annually from Russia to Germany.

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Biden Discusses Russia, Middle East in Telephone Call With NATO Chief - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in a call with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg discussed his intent to work with US allies on mutual security matters including Russia, Iraq and Afghanistan, the White House said in a readout on Tuesday.

"The President thanked the Secretary General for his steadfast leadership of the Alliance, and conveyed his intention to consult and work with allies on the full range of shared security concerns, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Russia," the readout said.

Both leaders also discussed the US commitment to collective defense and strengthening transatlantic security, the readout said.

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Biden Administration Supports Peaceful Transition in Venezuela - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – The administration of US President Joe Biden will press for a peaceful and democratic transition of power through elections in Venezuela, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"The overriding goal of the United States is to support a peaceful, democratic transition in Venezuela through free and fair elections," Psaki said.

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White House Confirms Biden, Putin Discussed Extension of New START Treaty

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the extension of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) as well as other bilateral issues, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"[Biden] called President Putin this afternoon with the intention of discussing our willingness to extend New Start for five years," Psaki said.

The two leaders also covered the ongoing turmoil in Ukraine as well as the SolarWinds security breach, alleged bounties on the US soldiers in Afghanistan, alleged interference in the 2020 election and the poisoning of Alexey Navalny, all of which Washington has blamed on Moscow. Russian officials have vigorously denied each of the allegations.

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UN Continues to Call for Reversal of US Houthis' Designation Amid Licenses - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations continues to call for the reversal of the US designation of the rebel Houthi movement as a terrorist organization after the issuance of a license authorizing transactions with the rebels on humanitarian grounds in Yemen, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We are indeed aware of the new general license issued by the US yesterday afternoon. This license exempts all transactions with Houthis from sanctions-related enforcement by the US authorities until the 26th of February," Dujarric said. "We continue to call for the reversal of the designation on humanitarian grounds."

Dujarric said that despite the introduction of the license, companies still signaled about their intention to cancel or suspend businesses with the Houthis.

The reaction of private companies will determine life and death for Yemenis as the country brings nearly all of its food by commercial imports, Dujarric said.

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, US President Joe Biden's administration has initiated a review of the designation.

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Biden Sees 2-State Solution as Only Way to Israeli-Palestinian Peace - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden continues to view a two-state solution as the only way to resolve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"Obviously, the president's view continues to be that a two-state solution is the only path forward. That continues to be the position of his White House and his administration," Psaki said.

Newly-confirmed Secretary of State Antony Blinken earlier said prospects for meaningful progress towards reconciliation are limited and called on both parties to refrain from unilateral actions.

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Republican Senator Paul to Force Vote on Constitutionality of Trump Impeachment Trial

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Republican Senator Rand Paul said on Tuesday that he will demand a vote to affirm former President Donald Trump's second impeachment trial is unconstitutional.

Paul's attempt comes just before the Senate is scheduled to be sworn in to serve as jurors in the impeachment trial.

"In a few minutes I will insist on a vote to affirm that this proceeding we are about to enter is unconstitutional," Paul said during remarks on the Senate floor.

Although the measure is unlikely to pass in the Democratic-controlled Senate, it would expose if there is enough Republican support to convict Trump, which requires 67 votes in the 100-seat chamber. This means 17 Republicans would have to break ranks. Hence, Paul's vote could allow opponents of the trial to argue that it would be an academic exercise.

The senator argued that Trump did not incite the violence on Capitol Hill on January 6, adding that Democrats have also been engaged in rhetoric that incited protesters to harass him during the Black Lives Matter protests last summer.

On Monday, the House of Representatives delivered the articles of impeachment to the Senate, which accuse Trump of inciting an insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6. US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said last week that Trump's impeachment trial is scheduled to begin the week of February 8.

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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Biden Administration to Review US Measures Against Nord Stream 2 Pipeline - White House WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's administration will review the restrictive measures taken by their predecessors against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, White House Press Secretary Jan Psaki told reporters in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We are aware that the previous administration imposed new restrictions on activities related to the pipeline under the National Defense Authorization Act, and we will be reviewing those measures," Psaki said. "And so, he [Biden] looks forward to continuing to consult with our European partners on this issue"

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California Man Arrested For Threatening Congressman's Family - Justice Department

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - A California man has been charged with sending threatening text messages to family members of a congressman from New York State, the US Department of Justice said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Robert Lemke was arrested today based on a criminal Complaint filed in Manhattan federal court charging [him] with making threatening interstate communications," the release said.

"Lemke allegedly sent threatening text messages on January 6, 2021 to family members of a New York City-based US congressman."

The Justice Department said Lemke also threatened a New York City-based family member of a journalist. He was arrested in Bay Point, California and will be presented on Wednesday in the US District Court for the Northern District of California.

"Your brother is putting your entire family at risk with his lies and other words. We are armed and near by your house. You had better have a word with him. We are not far from his either. Already spoke to [the congressman's son] and know where his kids are," Lemke texted, according to the Justice Department.

Lemke was dissatisfied with the results of the 2020 US presidential election and subsequent statements about the election made by the congressman and journalist and then allegedly threatened to harm those individuals' families, Manhattan US Attorney Audrey Strauss said in the release.

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Biden Believes Nord Stream 2 'Bad Deal' for Europe - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden considers the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project to be a poor deal for Europe, White House Press Secretary Jan Psaki said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"The president continues to believe that Nord Stream 2 is a bad deal for Europe," Psaki said.

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Biden to Announce Ban on New Federal Oil and Gas Leasing on Wednesday - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is poised to impose a moratorium on new federal oil and gas leasing Wednesday, a move likely to encounter stiff resistance from the fossil fuel industry, The Washington Post reported.

The White House has drafted documents that would pause new oil and gas auctions on federal land and water as the new administration reviews the program, the report said citing three people briefed on the matter. The moratorium would not affect existing leases, meaning drilling would continue on public land in the West as well as in the Gulf of Mexico, the report added. The decision would deliver on one of Biden's boldest climate campaign pledges. During the campaign, he promised to ban "new oil and gas permitting on public lands and waters," without specifying exactly what such a ban would entail.

Biden, who champions green or renewable energies, canceled the permit granted to the Keystone-XL Canada-US pipeline on his first day in office, citing environmental concerns.

The report said the president plans to outline steps Wednesday aimed at curbing greenhouse gas emissions and elevating the role of science in federal decision-making. Other new policies include protecting 30 percent of federal land and water by the end of the decade and identifying climate change as a national security priority.

The American Petroleum Institute (API), reacting to Biden's planned moratorium on new federal oil and gas leasing, said that the move alone will damage domestic energy producers while benefiting those abroad.

"Restricting development on federal lands and waters is nothing more than an 'import more oil' policy," API President Mike Sommers said. "Energy demand will continue to rise - especially as

the economy recovers - and we can choose to produce that energy here in the United States or rely on foreign countries hostile to American interests."

Fossil fuel leasing on federal and tribal land accounts for nearly a quarter of the country's annual carbon output. The drilling program also generated \$11.7 billion in tax revenue for the federal, state, local and tribal governments last year, according to the Interior Department's Office of Natural Resources Revenue.

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US Senate Confirms Blinken to Be Next Secretary of State

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Tuesday confirmed Antony Blinken to be the next Secretary of State.

The Senate confirmed Blinken's nomination in a 78-22 vote.

Blinken previously held top-level national security and State Department positions during the Obama administration.

He served as Principal Deputy National Security Advisor to President Barack Obama, National Security Advisor to then-Vice President Joe Biden, and Principal Advisor to President Bill Clinton for relations with the European Union and NATO.

In addition, Blinken worked six years as Democratic Staff Director at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as one of Biden's top aides.

Blinken has a reputation of an interventionist who supported the United States' invasion of Iraq and devised a partition plan for the country, backed military action in Libya and advocated a greater US involvement in Syria's crisis.

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US Commerce Secretary Nominee Vows to Use 'All Tools' to Level Playing Field With China

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's nominee for Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said during her Senate confirmation hearing on Tuesday that she will use all tools at her disposal to ensure a playing level field for American workers with respect to dealing with China.

"Whether it's the entities list or tariffs or any kind of prevailing duties, I intend to use all those tools to the fullest extent possible to level the playing field for the American worker against China," Raimondo said.

However, Raimondo avoided directly saying whether the Biden administration will continue the US policy of treating China's tech giant Huawei as a national security threat.

"I will review the policy, consult with the industry, our allies and make an assessment as to what's best for American national and economic security," Raimondo said when asked about Huawei.

If her position is confirmed by the Senate, Raimondo will inherit a host of enforcement actions against Chinese tech companies left by the Trump administration.

Of these, the most notable would be the crackdown on Huawei Technologies Co that requires US firms to obtain government licenses before they can transact with the Chinese telecom giant. Congress also approved in December \$1.9 billion to fund the replacement of ZTE and Huawei equipment in US networks.

The Commerce Department had overseen the restrictions on China via an "Entity List" created by the Trump administration. It was responsible for broad national-security based tariffs the United States imposed on steel and aluminum from key trading partners, including the European Union.

Toward the end of his term last year, then-President Donald Trump also went after Chinese social media and payment applications TikTok and WeChat, trying to force their sale to US entities. Those moves were later struck down by US courts.

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G7 Foreign Ministers Condemn Navalny Arrest – Statement

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The foreign ministers of the G7 countries on Tuesday condemned the arrest of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

"We, the G7 Foreign Ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America and the High Representative of the European Union, are united in condemning the politically motivated arrest and detention of Alexey Navalny," the ministers said in a statement.

On Saturday, multiple unauthorized protests took place in various regions of Russia, instigated by supporters of Navalny. Both the Russian Interior Ministry and Prosecutor General's Office warned that those participating in such events would be held liable to prosecution.

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Canada to Announce New COVID-19 Travel Restrictions in Coming Days - Trudeau

TORONTO, January 26 (Sputnik) - Canada will introduce additional COVID-19-related travel restrictions in the coming days, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said during a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We will not hesitate to take tougher measures if, and when, they are needed and we'll be making an announcement in the coming days," Trudeau said.

The prime minister noted the government is taking its time in crafting the new regulations in order to avoid disruptions to supply chains that operate via commercial air traffic. Ottawa last tweaked travel procedures earlier this month, mandating that all incoming passengers into Canada must submit a negative COVID-19 test prior to boarding.

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UN Chief Will Analyze Russia's Proposal to Hold Int'l Conference on Mideast Settlement

UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will analyze the proposal by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to convene an international conference on the Middle East settlement in the spring or summer of this year, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We will analyze the proposal. We've always called for a renewal of the activities of the Quartet, which is something that we hope we will see," Dujarric said.

Earlier on Tuesday, Lavrov proposed at the UN Security Council holding a ministerial meeting with the participation of the members of the Middle East Quartet, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Israel and Palestine.

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US Senate Confirms Blinken to Be Next Secretary of State

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Tuesday confirmed Antony Blinken to be the next Secretary of State.

The Senate confirmed Blinken's nomination with a 78-22 vote.

Blinken previously held top-level national security and State Department positions during the Obama administration.

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Democrats Introduce Bill in Congress to Boost US Minimum Wage to \$15 by 2025

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Democrats in the US House and Senate have introduced new legislation to raise the minimum wage in the United States to \$15 an hour by year 2025, the House Education and Labor Committee said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Today, House Committee on Education and Labor (HELP) Chair Robert Scott joined incoming Senate Budget Committee Chair Bernie Sanders, incoming Senate HELP Committee Chair

[Senator] Patty Murray, Congressional Progressive Caucus Chair Pramila Jayapal and Representative Stephanie Murphy to introduce legislation gradually raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 by 2025," the release said.

The Raise the Wage Act of 2021 would gradually increase the federal minimum wage to \$15 over five years and afterwards, the federal minimum wage would be indexed to median wage growth, the release explained.

"The legislation also guarantees that all workers are paid at least the full federal minimum wage by gradually phasing out the subminimum wages for tipped workers, youth workers, and workers with disabilities," the release said.

Congress has not increased the federal minimum wage in more than a decade, which is the longest period without a rise since it was first established in 1938. Nearly 32 million US workers would eventually get a raise as a result of the legislation, the release added.

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US Spacecraft With Asteroid Sample to Begin 2-Year Flight Back to Earth May 10 - NASA

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The OSIRIS-Rex spacecraft, which scooped and stowed a 2 ounce sample from the asteroid Bennu in October 2020, will begin its journey back to Earth on May 10, NASA said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Leaving Bennu's vicinity in May puts us in the 'sweet spot,' when the departure maneuver will consume the least amount of the spacecraft's onboard fuel," OSIRIS-REx Deputy Project Manager Michael Moreau said in the release.

The spacecraft touched down on the asteroid surface October 20, long enough to collect a sample that likely exceeds the mission's 2-ounce goal from the surface, the release said. NASA also said it plans a previously unscheduled flyby of the asteroid in April to examine damage to the celestial orb during the October landing.

Bennu's surface was considerably disturbed after the Touch-and-Go (TAG) sample collection event, with the collector head sinking 1.6 feet (48.8 centimeters) into the asteroid's surface. The spacecraft's thrusters also disturbed a substantial amount of surface material during the back-away burn, according to the release.

As it approaches Earth in September 2023, OSIRIS-REx will jettison the Sample Return Capsule (SRC) toward Earth for a parachute assisted landing in the US state of Utah, the release said.

Scientists hope the material from Bennu will provide new clues about how the solar system formed with Earth as a habitable planet, the release added.

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Family Hopeful Biden Will Engage Russia to Secure Paul Whelan's Release - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The family of US citizen Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year prison sentence in Russia for espionage, issued a statement on Tuesday in which it expressed hope the new administration of President Joe Biden will be more active to secure his release.

"President Biden has said that he will be a president for all Americans. The United States has not had a president with that viewpoint for the entirety of Paul's wrongful detention. I am hopeful that, once again, the American government will care about the welfare of all Americans in peril," the statement said.

The Biden administration seems to be more ready to engage with Russia than the Trump administration had been on a range of issues, the statement said.

"The early statements about continuing the New START treaty are a good example," the statement said. "The sooner the State Department's leadership is in place, the sooner it can re-engage with the Russian Federation."

Paul Whelan, who is also a citizen of the United Kingdom, Canada and Ireland, was arrested in Russia in December 2018 on charges of espionage and sentenced by a Moscow court on June 15. He denies being involved in espionage and insists he visited Russia to attend a friend's wedding.

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Biden Will Urge Israel, Palestinians to Avoid Taking Unilateral Steps - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) -The Biden administration will call on Israel and the Palestinians to avoid taking unilateral steps, including annexation of territory, settlement activity and demolitions, that could delay reaching a two-state solution, US Acting Permanent Representative to the United Nations Richard Mills told the UN Security Council on Tuesday.

"The United States will urge Israel's government and the Palestinian Authority to avoid unilateral steps that make a two-state solution more difficult, such as the annexation of territory, settlement activity, demolitions, incitement to violence and providing compensation for individuals imprisoned for acts of terrorism," Mills said.

Mills expressed hope that it will be possible to start working on building confidence on both sides to create an environment conducive to finding a peaceful solution to the decades-long conflict.

The Biden administration will restore credible engagement with both sides, including renewing US relations with the Palestinian leadership, Mills added.

Last January, former US President Donald Trump presented a peace plan, named "The Deal of the Century," which among other things envisioned Israel annexing the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and keeping Jerusalem as its capital. The Palestinian leadership rejected the plan.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in May terminated all treaties with the United States and Israel after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu officially announced his annexation plans during the swearing-in ceremony of his new cabinet.

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US Commerce Secretary Nominee Vows to Use 'All Tools' to Level Playing Field With China
WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's nominee for Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said during her Senate confirmation hearing on Tuesday that she will use all tools at her disposal to ensure a playing level field for American workers with respect to dealing with China.

"Whether it's the entities list or tariffs or any kind of prevailing duties, I intend to use all those tools to the fullest extent possible to level the playing field for the American worker against China," Raimondo said.

However, Raimondo avoided directly saying whether the Biden administration will continue the US policy of treating China's tech giant Huawei as a national security threat, saying: "I will review the policy, consult with the industry consult, our allies and make an assessment as to what's best for American national and economic security."

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US Air Force \$3.6Bln Contract Supports Aerial Battle Management System - Northrop Grumman

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - A five-year US defense contract valued at \$3.6 billion provides continued support for support for the Air Force's Battlefield Airborne Communications Node (BACN), Northrop Grumman said in a press release on Tuesday.

"This contract provides for research, development, test, and evaluation, integration and operations and sustainment for existing and future payloads contained in or connected to the BACN system. It also includes associated ground stations or controls, ancillary equipment, support equipment and system integration laboratories," the release said.

Work under the contract will be performed in the state of California and overseas locations through January 2026, the release noted.

The BACN system as a high-altitude, communications gateway that translates and distributes imagery, voice and tactical data to link warfighters and equipment operating in in space, air, land and sea, according to the release.

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Biden Will Restore US Aid for Palestinians, Reopen Diplomatic Missions - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will restore humanitarian assistance programs for the Palestinian people and will take steps to reopen diplomatic missions that were closed by his predecessor Donald Trump, US Acting Permanent Representative to the United Nations Richard Mills said on Tuesday.

"President Biden has been clear in his intent to restore US assistance programs, which support economic development and humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people, and to take steps to reopen diplomatic missions that were closed by the last US administration," Mills told the UN Security Council .

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Biden Will Support Israeli-Palestinian Mutually-Agreed 2 State Solution - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) - The administration of President Joe Biden will support a mutually-agreed two-state solution embracing Israel living in peace and security with a viable Palestinian state, US Acting Permanent Representative to the United Nations Richard Mills told the UN Security Council on Tuesday.

"Under the new administration, the policy of the United States will be to support a mutually agreed, two-state solution, in which Israel lives in peace and security, alongside a viable Palestinian state," Mills said. "This vision... remains the best way to ensure Israel's future as a democratic and Jewish state, while upholding the Palestinian people's legitimate aspirations for a state of their own, and to live with dignity and security."

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Americans' Satisfaction With Nation's Direction Dips to 11% in January - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Just over one in ten US voters expressed satisfaction with the "way things are going" in the United States in January, amid the transition of power and rising COVID-19 deaths, a Gallup poll said on Tuesday.

"Before the January 20 inauguration of Joe Biden as the nation's 46th president, 11 percent of Americans said they are satisfied with the way things are going in the US. This is down from 16 percent in December... while remaining a few percentage points above the all-time low of 7 percent recorded in 2008," a press release explaining the poll said.

The release cited the COVID-19 pandemic as one factor for the dour national mood, as well as former President Donald Trump's refusal to concede to an election defeat and the January 6 takeover of the Capitol by rioting Trump supporters.

Last year began much more positively, with US satisfaction readings above 40 percent in each of the first three months, including a 45 percent satisfaction measure in February, the highest since the George W. Bush administration.

But satisfaction began a steady decline in the spring, when the coronavirus pandemic hit the United States with full force, the release said.

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Number of Passengers Trying to Carry Guns on US Flights Doubles - TSA

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The number of passengers on US airline flights seeking to bring guns on to their planes doubled in 2020 compared to the previous year, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) said on Tuesday.

"TSA detected twice as many guns per million passengers screened at checkpoints nationwide in 2020 compared to 2019," the federal agency, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), said via Twitter.

The number of passengers trying to bring guns on to their flights was still very low in percentage terms, the TSA also noted.

"In 2020, TSA caught about ten guns per million passengers screened as compared to about five guns per million passengers screened in 2019," the agency said.

The TSA was created as a response to the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the United States. The agency employs screening officers in airports, armed federal air marshals on passenger flights and other personnel.

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms,

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New UN Envoy Wennesland Says Looks Forward to Engaging With Mideast Quartet

UNITED NATIONS, January 26 (Sputnik) - UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland said on Tuesday that he looked forward to engaging with the Middle East Quartet counterparts soon to identify steps to bring Israel and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table.

Wennesland noted that the Middle East Quartet held a virtual meeting on December 23 to address the prospect of Israeli-Palestinian peace.

"I look forward to engaging with my counterparts very soon to identify concrete steps to bring the parties back to the path of meaningful negotiations," Wennesland told a UN Security Council meeting.

The Quartet was established in 2002 with a mandate to facilitate the Middle-East peace process negotiations following the second intifada. The group includes Russia, the United States, the European Union and the United Nations. The Quartet was officially welcomed in UN Security Council Resolution 1397.

Wennesland also said he looked forward to initial meetings with the Israeli and Palestinian governments in the coming days.

On December 22, Wennesland assumed the current position by replacing Nickolay Mladenov, who resigned from the United Nations.

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China's Success in Containing Pandemic Important for Quick Economic Recovery - IMF

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The steps China took to successfully contain the novel coronavirus pandemic allowed Beijing to quickly restore the economy, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Economic Counselor Gita Gopinath told reporters after releasing an updated World Economic Outlook (WEO).

"China has been very successful in containing the pandemic, and this played an important role to bring back activity much more quickly," Gopinath said on Tuesday.

Policy support was a big driver of the impressive rebound in China in 2020, according to the IMF.

Research Department Division Chief Malhar Nabar said the continuing of private consumption has been particularly important for China's economic recovery.

The IMF expects to see growth in China's private sector activity in 2021, Nabar added.

The IMF downgraded its forecast for China's economic growth by 0.1 percentage points to 8.1 percent in 2021 and by 0.2 percentage points to 5.6 percent in 2022.

China's economy in 2020 grew by 2.3 percent, according to the IMF.

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RPT - Sullivan, Patrushev Discuss US Intention to Seek New START Extension - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - A senior Biden administration told Sputnik that US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev spoke about the United States' intention to seek a five-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) that is set to expire on February 5.

"I can confirm that Jake Sullivan spoke today with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev about our intent to seek a five-year extension for the New START Treaty," the official said on Monday.

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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RPT - US Needs Comprehensive Strategy to Address Range of Issues Related to China - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States needs a comprehensive strategy to address a full range of issues on China, including in the US technology sector, a State Department spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

"We need a comprehensive strategy and a more systematic approach that actually addresses the full range of these issues, rather than the piecemeal approach of the past few years," the spokesperson said on Monday.

The spokesperson said the United States must hold China accountable for unfair and illegal practices, adding that US technology must not be used to support China's military buildup or its malign activities.

In addition, the United States must invest in boosting its technological strength in order to maintain an edge in innovation, the spokesperson said.

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RPT: REVIEW - US Sees Brazil COVID-19 Variant Emerge as Biden Ramps Up Pandemic Response

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The Brazil strain of COVID-19 has been confirmed for the first time in the United States just as President Joe Biden's administration is escalating a multipronged effort to contain the disease, including travel restrictions and a vaccine distribution campaign that is now in a high pressure race against an invisible mutating enemy.

The US is by far the global leader in COVID-19 casualties - with more than 25 million cases and more than 420,000 deaths. In recent days, Biden has launched what the administration has called a comprehensive campaign to control COVID-19, which includes acceleration of the vaccine distribution and expanding mitigation measures. However, Biden has also painted a dark near-term forecast, warning that the US death toll will surpass 500,000 by next month.

BRAZIL VIRUS EMERGES

Although the figures have dropped over the past couple weeks in the wake of a holiday surge, the US COVID-19 death rate remains alarmingly high. And now the emergence of a new threat will likely only raise fears even further that the US will not reverse the tide anytime soon.

On Monday evening, the US state of Minnesota Health Department confirmed in a statement that the first case of the novel coronavirus strain found in Brazil has been transmitted in the United States.

"The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) today announced that its Public Health Laboratory has found the variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus known as the Brazil P.1 variant in a specimen from a Minnesota resident with recent travel history to Brazil," the release said on Monday. The new strain found in Brazil is more transmissible but it is not yet known if it causes more severe illness, the release said. The release said the individual infected with the Brazil strain became ill the first week of January.

The development comes the very day President Joe Biden signed an order to maintain restrictions on travelers from Europe and Brazil, while adding South Africa to the list.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has warned that the UK-origin B.1.1.7 could become a dominant strain in the United States by March. With respect to the B.1.351 South African strain, the CDC warned that this variant contained a set of additional mutations that may affect its ability to be recognized by antibodies.

Moderna announced on Monday that its COVID-19 vaccine has demonstrated a neutralizing impact on UK and South African variants of the coronavirus. However, US Director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said existing vaccines against the coronavirus may need to be upgraded to tackle the UK and South African strains.

BIDEN ESCALATES ANTI-COVID-19 CAMPAIGN

Last week, the Biden administration unveiled a comprehensive COVID-19 strategy that aims to administer 100 million shots in 100 days. In addition to the vaccine, the White House vows to expand mitigation measures such as social distancing, masking, testing, and travel restrictions and promises to roll out an effective plan to safely reopen schools and businesses.

Biden said during a press conference that the United States will be well on its way to herd immunity from the novel coronavirus by this summer. He also sounded even more optimistic about the vaccine strategy.

"I think we may be able to get to... 1.5 million a day rather than 1 million a day," Biden said.

The president clarified that he was referring to the number of daily inoculations since vaccines approved in the United States require two shots per person with an interval of a couple of weeks.

Earlier, at the first day of the Davos Agenda virtual event, Fauci said the lack of cooperation both at the federal and local levels, as well as the divisiveness in the society, have seriously undermined the US efforts to battle the COVID-19 pandemic including the vaccine campaign. Many Republicans have attacked the Biden administration for blaming current supply shortages on Trump. The second ranking House Republican, Whip Steven Scalise, in a statement on Friday said because of Trump's Operation Warp Speed the United States is already administering close to a million vaccines a day.

Last week, Baylor College of Medicine infectious disease expert Peter Hotez told VOX the US should aim for at least 2 million shots a day considering some 80% of Americans need to be

vaccinated to reach herd immunity. At the proposed rates, the US would not reach sufficient immunization levels until September or October, according to the report.

The US is also taking steps towards boosting global engagement. Last week Biden signed an order reversing the Trump administration decision to exit the World Health Organization.

Rodney Hunter, Political Coordinator at the US Mission to the United Nations said in a Security Council meeting on Monday that the US was ready to back the organization.

"The WHO must play a central role in our combined response to this pandemic," Hunter said.

"As a WHO member state, the United States will work closely with all of you to ensure the WHO is strengthened and reformed appropriately, not only to face this current challenge but also to effectively stand up to other challenges yet to come."

Hunter also said that the United States looks forward to working with the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, COVAX and Gavi Vaccine Alliance to help facilitate a rapid vaccine rollout worldwide.