

02/02/21 Tuesday

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'We Are a Long Way' From Reviving Iran Nuclear Deal, US State Dept Says
by [Mary F.](#)

Tensions between the US and Iran have been high ever since former US president Donald Trump in 2018 withdrew from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and imposed harsh sanctions against Iran. US President Joe Biden's administration has pledged to return to the nuclear agreement as long as Iran returns to compliance.

No US officials have been in contact with Iranian officials since the Biden administration came into power last month, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"The answer is no," Price said when asked if any State Department officials have been in contact with Iranian officials since January 20.

Price also noted that it is still too early to consider Iran's proposal to revive the nuclear deal, adding that "we are a long way from that."

In a Monday interview with NBC News, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the administration of US President Joe Biden plans to return to the Iran nuclear deal, [Al-Jazeera reported](#).

Blinken also stated in the interview that Iran was months away from developing a nuclear bomb. Also on Monday, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif urged top EU foreign envoy Josep Borrell to mediate the revival of the beleaguered 2015 nuclear deal between the US and Iran.

Zarif also warned Monday that the US does not have an "unlimited" time to return to the deal. "The United States needs to come back into compliance and Iran will be ready – immediately – to respond," Zarif told CNN. "The timing is not the issue. The issue is whether the United States, whether the new administration, wants to follow the old failed policies of the Trump administration or not."

Zarif also rejected allegations that Tehran is months away from developing a nuclear bomb. "Iran does not seek a nuclear weapon. If we wanted to build a nuclear weapon, we could have done it some time ago, but we decided that nuclear weapons would not augment our security and are in contradiction to our ideological views," Zarif said.

In 2018, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the deal and reimposed sanctions on Iran. Tehran responded by gradually abandoning its own commitments. This past December, the Iranian government passed a law aimed at achieving a full removal of sanctions via a boost of nuclear activities, specifically by increasing the levels of uranium enrichment and limiting the access of the International Atomic Energy Agency to its facilities.

In January, Blinken said that the United States would reciprocate Iran's resumed compliance with the nuclear deal, but would seek a broader agreement that also covers its missile program. Zarif responded by ruling out any revisions to the original deal and insisting that Washington remove sanctions first.

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House Homeland Security Republicans Urge White House to Clarify Counter Strategy Against China
by [Mary F.](#)

Tensions between the US and China have been high in recent years under the former US president Donald Trump administration due to the trade war between the two countries as well as military drills and patrols in highly contested areas including the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

On Tuesday, House Republicans on the Committee on Homeland Security called on the White House to provide "definitive clarity" on its strategy to counter threats from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which they have accused of undermining American dominance. "We remain extraordinarily concerned about the CCP's blatant efforts to weaponize their private sector for intelligence and military purposes, exploit the data of American people and businesses, and manipulate the global markets for critical and emerging technologies, all while being less than forthcoming on the international stage," reads the letter to National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, obtained by [Fox News](#).

"It is imperative that we prevent an authoritarian, communist regime that is actively engaged in genocide and does not share America's interests from infiltrating and exploiting our nation's communications and technology backbone," the letter continues.

Republicans on the House committee also expressed concern in the letter that some of Biden's nominees and appointment have "not yet provided definitive clarity on how the administration plans on continuing the productive measures from the last four years to protect our homeland from this far-reaching CCP threat."

While the Trump administration took a harsh approach against China, imposing trade tariffs on the country, the Biden administration is expected to take a less aggressive stance.

China's foreign minister Wang Yi has expressed that he believes Biden represents a "new window of hope" for China's relationship with the United States.

The Biden administration will "return to a sensible approach, resume dialogue with China, restore normalcy to the bilateral relations and restart cooperation," Wang recently said, Fox News reported.

However, during his confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Antony Blinken revealed that he believes Trump was correct in taking a tough approach towards China.

"I disagree very much with the way that he [Trump] went about it in a number of areas, but the basic principle was the right one, and I think that's actually helpful to our foreign policy," Blinken said.

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Teen Emerging From 10-Month Coma Oblivious to COVID-19 Pandemic
by [Mary F.](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic has infected more than 104 million people and killed more than 2 million people worldwide since it was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The World Health Organization declared the outbreak a pandemic in March 2020.

Joseph Flavill, a 19-year-old teenager emerging from a 10-month-long coma, has no knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a report by the Guardian. Flavill entered a coma on March 1 last year - three weeks before Britain's first national lockdown began - after being hit by a car.

According to the [Guardian](#), Flavill caught COVID-19 twice during his recovery but has since recovered. Details regarding how he caught COVID-19 twice while hospitalized were not provided.

Flavill is currently in the process of recovering; he is able to move his limbs when asked and can also interact with friends and family through blinking and smiling.

"He won't know anything about the pandemic as he's been asleep for 10 months. His awareness is starting to improve now but we just don't know what he knows," the teen's aunt, Sally Flavill Smith, told the Guardian.

"I just don't know where to start with it. A year ago if someone had told me what was going to happen over the last year, I don't think I would have believed it. I've got no idea how Joseph's going to come to understand what we've all been through," she added.

According to Sally, the family has tried to explain over video call to Flavill, when he's awake, that they're unable to be with him in person due to COVID-19 restrictions.

"When he's awake in his room, he's not going to have any idea why he's there. We do talk about it on the phone, and we try to make him aware that we really want to be there holding his hands, but we're just unable to do it [because of COVID-19]," Smith explained.

"But we try to keep it as simple as possible, we don't really have the time to go into the pandemic hugely - it just doesn't feel real does it? When he can actually have the face-to-face contact, that will be the opportunity to actually try to explain to him what has happened," she continued.

The teen was originally treated at the Leicester General hospital in Leicester, England, and has since been moved to the Adderley Green Care Centre in Stoke-on-Trent, England, where he is continuing to recover.

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US Issues License Allowing Certain Transactions Necessary to Port, Airport Operations in Venezuela
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US government has maintained economic sanctions against Venezuela for several years, but significantly increased them in January 2019 when Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro began his second term, claiming his victory was illegitimate and recognizing Juan Guaido as the country's self-proclaimed interim president.

On Tuesday, the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control [lowered certain restrictions](#) regarding transactions "ordinarily incident and necessary to operations or use of ports and airports in Venezuela."

The order modifies the terms of two executive orders issued by former US President Donald Trump that targeted assets held by the Venezuelan government, President Nicolas Maduro, or anyone affiliated with the government or the president.

"Except as provided in paragraph (c) of this general license, all transactions and activities involving the Government of Venezuela prohibited by Executive Order (E.O.) 13884 of August 5, 2019, as incorporated into the Venezuela Sanctions Regulations, 31 C.F.R. part 591 (the VSR), that are ordinarily incident and necessary to operations or use of ports and airports in Venezuela are authorized," the order signed by Bradley Smith, the Acting Director of the Office of Foreign Assets Control, said.

An executive order on August 5, 2019, by then-US President Donald Trump imposed [an effective blockade](#) on Venezuela, barring nearly all trade with the country without a specific license. However, by 2019, US sanctions had already been revealed to be responsible for [killing tens of thousands](#) of Venezuelans by frustrating the country's ability to import medicine and other treatments.

Since January 2019, Washington has recognized Guaido, then the head of Venezuela's disempowered National Assembly, as the country's interim president after he unexpectedly declared himself so. The announcement heralded the beginning of a hybrid war aiming to force Maduro from power as [economic sanctions created](#) a humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, which US leaders expected would cause the population to revolt against Maduro and back Guaido. However, that hasn't happened, and subsequent efforts, including an American [mercenary hit squad](#) hired by Guaido to capture or kill Maduro, have failed.

After US President Joe Biden took office on January 20, his administration [quickly recognized Guaido](#) as Venezuela's legitimate leader, even though Guaido is no longer [even a member](#) of Venezuela's National Assembly, on which Guaido had based his previous claim to power, and even though the head of Venezuela's opposition, Henrique Capriles, [has asked Biden](#) to drop his recognition. Several dozen nations had previously recognized Guaido's claim, although last week, the [European Union seemingly](#) reversed its previous position, saying Guaido was merely an opposition leader.

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Pentagon Could Shred JEDI Cloud Computing Project if US Court Rules in Amazon's Favor by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Amazon has alleged that former US President Donald Trump's personal dislike of its CEO, Jeff Bezos, is responsible for the Pentagon awarding a huge cloud computing contract that was seemingly tailor-made for Amazon to Microsoft instead.

The US Department of Defense said in a memo it would consider discarding the Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure cloud computing project if a US court sides with Amazon, which has claimed the Pentagon's decision to award the lucrative contract to Microsoft was biased.

In December, Amazon Web Services asked a judge in a federal claims court to [set aside the Pentagon's decision](#) to give the \$10 billion JEDI contract to Microsoft - its latest move in the quest to win the contract for itself. In turn, the government has motioned for the judge to dismiss the part of Amazon's claim alleging "improper influence" in the awarding of the contract.

However, the Defense Department's Chief Information Officer (CIO) told Congress in a recent memo that if the judge rules in Amazon's favor, the resulting litigation process could imperil the entire JEDI program.

[According to the memo](#), which was obtained by Nextgov, the judge upholding Amazon's claim would "need to be substantively litigated" and will demand "arguments over other Motions, in particular, a Motion for Discovery, which will include requests for depositions of senior officials at the White House and DoD, including former DoD and White House Senior Officials. These motions will be complex and elongate the timeline significantly. The prospect of such a lengthy litigation process might bring the future of the JEDI Cloud procurement into question. Under this scenario, the DoD CIO would reassess the strategy going forward."

"Regardless of the JEDI cloud litigation outcome, the department continues to have an urgent, unmet requirement," the DoD memo further notes. "Specifically, the department's need for an enterprise-wide, commercial cloud services for all three classification levels, extending from the homefront to the tactical edge, at scale. We remain fully committed to meeting this requirement - we hope through JEDI - but this requirement transcends any one procurement, and we will be prepared to ensure it is met one way or another."

[Amazon has alleged](#) that during the Pentagon's review process for the JEDI contract, its decision was unduly influenced by government officials, including Trump, who it alleged launched "behind-the-scenes attacks" on the company. Ironically, after the JEDI contract was announced in 2018, [Oracle launched its own](#) lawsuit in which it alleged the contract seemed to be tailor-made for Amazon. In response, Trump ordered then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper to [halt contract considerations](#) in August 2019 and investigate the favoritism allegations.

The contract was awarded to Microsoft that October. However, it was later revealed that Oracle and Microsoft had [coordinated their efforts](#) to deny Amazon the contract. Other companies that bid on the contract included Google, IBM, and Hitachi's REAN Cloud.

Whoever wins the contract will be put in charge of the US military's entire IT infrastructure, making it responsible for everything from computing in real-time and addressing bugs as well as providing top-notch security.

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'Hitting the Brakes Isn't Enough': Rights Groups Push for Biden to Tear Down Trump's Border Wall

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Trump administration waved 28 different federal laws concerning environmental health, endangered species, water safety, and Native American sovereignty in order to build former US President Donald Trump's border wall pet project on the US-Mexico border.

The Biden administration has asked the US Supreme Court to cancel the upcoming arguments for two cases brought by the Trump administration over funding for the US-Mexico border wall and a policy requiring asylum-seekers to stay in Mexico. However, the White House has cautioned that it is not yet ready to implement a new immigration process.

Acting Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar has [asked the Supreme Court](#) to hold the cases in abeyance and remove them from the argument calendar. One case, Biden v. Sierra Club, concerns a 2019 order by then-US Defense Secretary Mark Esper that redirected \$2.5 billion worth of "counterdrug support funds" in the Pentagon budget toward construction of the wall on the US-Mexico border.

The other, now called Pecoske v. Innovation Law Lab after then-acting Homeland Security Secretary David Pecoske, is a challenge to an injunction blocking implementation of the [Migrant Protection Protocols](#) (MPP) - the so-called "Remain in Mexico" policy by which DHS required asylum-seekers to await their hearing dates in Mexico.

On his first day in office, Biden issued executive orders halting construction on all border projects authorized under Trump's state of emergency at the border and paused the MPP program for a review. His administration has since introduced legislation to Congress overhauling the Trump-era immigration laws.

Mr. Biden, Tear Down This Wall

However, civil rights groups are now pressuring Biden to go even further and actively tear down the more than 400 miles of border wall built during the Trump administration.

"Trump's wall devastated border communities, the environment, and tribal sites," Dror Ladin, senior staff attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) National Security Project said in [a press release](#). "It's time for the Biden administration to step up for border communities, and commit to mitigating environmental damage and tearing down the wall."

Sierra Club managing attorney Gloria Smith similarly said the group was "relieved to see a pause on wall construction while the Biden administration decides whether to defend Trump's illegal and disastrous national emergency declaration."

"Ultimately, the destructive border wall must be torn down. Constructing a wall has stripped environmental, cultural and health protections from border communities, bulldozed through Tribal sites and burial grounds, and left irreversible scars on wildlife habitat and local towns. The new administration must implement a new vision for the borderlands - one that protects human rights, Tribal sovereignty and the environment."

The wall's path was found to further [endanger 93 species](#) already on the Endangered Species List, and would have bifurcated the land of the [Tohono O'odham Nation](#), which straddles the border. In all, the Trump administration circumvented or ignored [28 federal laws](#) to build the wall. Reviewing MPP

On January 21, Biden halted new enrollment in the MPP program pending a review of the entire program. With a waiting list of tens of thousands of applicants who are only being admitted at a trickle, many asylum-seekers have been left out to dry in [encampments across](#) the border in

Mexico where [criminals prey](#) on those waiting to enter the US and diseases like COVID-19 run rampant.

Biden's recently confirmed homeland security secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, is a former head of US Citizenship and Immigration Services and has pledged to end the MPP program.

However, [as Sputnik reported](#), the bill Biden sent to Congress overhauling US immigration regulations doesn't seem to shed the most basic parts of MPP, including forcing migrants to wait across the border.

However, at a Tuesday press conference, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki underscored that "this is not the time" for new migrants to come to the US border seeking entry.

"We want to put in place an immigration process, here, that is humane, that is moral," Psaki told reporters. "That's going to take some time, it's not going to happen overnight. Obviously, we have a bill that we are hoping will be able to move through Congress."

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GameStop Shares Tumble 60% as Robinhood Eases Buying Limits
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Stock in the brick-and-mortar video game store began to rise in mid-January amid a board shakeup, but hedge funds bet huge amounts of money that the stocks would quickly lose value. When they guessed wrong, they lost some \$70 billion.

GameStop's stocks have fallen by 70% this week, thanks largely to measures taken by Robinhood and other stock trading apps to heavily limit the number of shares traders can buy in the video game retail company.

The decline was temporarily reversed on Tuesday after Robinhood announced it was increasing the buying cap on GameStop and several other stocks targeted both by Wall Street short-sellers and a group of [amateur online traders](#) coordinating their buys on the WallStreetBets subreddit. However, the decline shortly resumed and GameStop's stock ended Tuesday at \$90.00 a share, having lost 60% of its value in a single day.

[According to CNBC](#), Robinhood now allows clients to buy 100 shares of GameStop, up from the previous limit of 20 shares, but not if the user already owns more than 100 shares in the company. Larger limit increases were implemented for stocks in AMC Entertainment, Naked Brand Group, Nokia, Express, and Koss, the values of which followed a similar track to GameStop's.

Concurrently, however, CashApp announced Tuesday that its clearing broker, Axos Bank, had temporarily halted purchases of Nokia and AMC stock.

"We disagree with this move wholeheartedly," the app said on its Twitter account. "We hope to make these stocks available for purchase again as soon as possible."

Last week, Robinhood imposed a limit on buying the skyrocketing stocks, claiming the price spike was creating "unreasonable risk." The move brought [widespread outrage](#) that included a [class-action lawsuit](#) by users alleging the company violated the terms of use. Along with similar moves by several other competitor apps as well as brokerage firms, the meteoric rise of

GameStop's stock was dented and leveled off at nearly \$500 a share, having been roughly \$19 at the start of the new year.

Thanks to the [resulting short squeeze](#), hedge funds that bet heavily on short-sold stocks lost more than \$70 billion in January 2021 alone.

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Trump's Lawyers Claim US Senate Has No Authority to Try Him After Leaving Office
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Although US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) let his support for the impeachment of former US President Donald Trump be known, his delaying of the trial until after Trump left office has provided Trump's legal team with grounds to claim the trial's purpose is moot.

With Trump expected to stand trial next week in the US Senate on impeachment charges that he incited the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol, his legal team has poured criticism over the procedure, claiming in a legal brief that the US Senate has no authority to try him as a private citizen.

The US House of Representatives [filed its pretrial brief](#) on Tuesday, in which it laid out its case for accusing Trump of spurring the crowd at his "Stop the Steal" rally outside the White House to then assault the US Capitol at the other end of the National Mall, disperse Congress from its joint session certifying the results of the November 3, 2020, election, and void the results of that election.

In a response, Trump's lawyers, Bruce L. Castor, Jr., and David Schoen, [have claimed the trial](#) is unconstitutional in part because Trump is no longer President of the United States. Trump's term ended on January 20, when US President Joe Biden was sworn in.

"The constitutional provision requires that a person actually hold off to be impeached," the filing argues. "Since the 45 president is no longer 'president,' the clause 'shall be removed from office on impeachment for...' is impossible for the Senate to accomplish, and thus the current proceeding before the Senate is void ab initio."

"The 45th president believes and therefore avers that as a private citizen, the Senate has no jurisdiction over his ability to hold office and for the Senate to take action on this averment would constitute a Bill of Attainder in violation of Art. I, Sec. 9. Cl. 3 of the United States Constitution. The 45th president asks the Senate to dismiss Averment 2 relating to the 14th amendment as moot," Trump's lawyers further argued.

The section of the 14th amendment in question states that any person who has "engaged in insurrection or rebellion against" the US may not "hold any office ... under the United States." The amendment was passed in the aftermath of the 1861-65 US Civil War, during which 13 US states tried and failed to secede from the country in order to preserve the legal enslavement of Black people.

In their own previous filing, House Democrats urged that "There is no 'January Exception' to impeachment or any other provision of the Constitution. A president must answer comprehensively for his conduct in office from his first day in office through his last."

In the Senate, 45 Republicans have already come out against the trial, voting to dismiss the charges on the grounds that they are unconstitutional at this point. However, Democrats seized a narrow majority in the chamber in recent elections, meaning the charges will not so easily be cast aside as Trump's first impeachment trial in January and February of 2020. In that trial, which took place before a Republican-majority Senate, Trump was accused of abuse of power and obstructing Congress in connection with the interruption of military aid to Ukraine in an attempt to pressure Kiev into investigating Biden and his son, Hunter, for business dealings in the country some years earlier.

During the [January 6 attack](#) on the Capitol, five people were killed and the national legislature was looted by Trump's supporters, many of whom have claimed they were acting on Trump's orders and in defense of the US Constitution. However, they ultimately failed in their venture, and after the rioters were cleared from the building, lawmakers reconvened and certified the election results showing Biden as the winner.

Trump had claimed since long before the November 3 election that it would be rigged by Democrats, and after the ballot totals came in, Trump claimed they were fraudulent and had been manipulated by Democrats and Democrat-friendly companies. The January 6 protest-turned-riot was one of [several such events](#) put on by Trump and his supporters in Washington, DC, with the intent of overturning the election and giving Trump a second term, some of which sent city residents fleeing after [far-right groups attacked](#) local Black churches and other institutions.

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US Senate Confirms Alejandro Mayorkas to Be Next Secretary of Homeland Security
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

A majority of lawmakers in the US Senate voted in favor of confirming Alejandro Mayorkas' nomination, marking the official as the first immigrant to run the Department of Homeland Security. Mayorkas was born in Cuba and is the son of Jewish refugees.

US Senate lawmakers on Tuesday voted in favor of confirming Mayorkas as the next official to serve as the head of the Homeland Security agency, despite opposing sentiment from some individuals that he is unfit to serve.

The vote came down to 56 in favor and 43 against, deeming him the very first Senate-confirmed leader of the department in about 21 months.

Sens. Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV), Mitt Romney (R-Ut) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) were among the six GOP lawmakers who crossed party lines and voted in favor of the confirmation. Democrats had intended to fast-track the confirmation vote, however, efforts were quickly stalled after questions were raised by Republicans about Mayorkas time as the head of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services during the Obama years.

Ahead of the vote, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) called on his fellow Republican lawmakers to vote against Mayorkas, citing the Biden nominee as an "ethically-compromised partisan lawyer."

Speaking from the Senate floor, McConnell accused Mayorkas of doing his "best to turn [the] US Citizenship and Immigration Services into an unethical favor factory for Democratic Party royalty" when he served under the Obama administration.

"We are talking about shoving through green cards as political favors, and intervening to overturn denials," he added, highlighting a [2015 report](#) by the inspector general that indicated Mayorkas aided foreign investors with the [EB-5 visa program](#).

The report itself noted USCIS staffers had grown concerned that Mayorkas' involvement in three cases tied to the EB-5 visa program seemed to suggest he was providing a special treatment to investors who had connections to top Democrats.

However, it's worth noting that the report did not specifically conclude that Mayorkas violated the law. At the time, Mayorkas addressed the issue during a hearing in the House chamber and denied any wrongdoing.

The report noted that Mayorkas intervened in procedures involving investors who were linked to former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV), former Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe and Anthony Rodham, brother of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Rebuffing Republican calls for additional testimony from Mayorkas, Democrats largely argued that the nominee urgently needed to be confirmed so the department could have a leader to address national security concerns.

Immigration matters are likely to occupy much of Mayorkas' time with the department as US President Joe Biden has taken a hard stance on revoking many of the Trump administration's immigration policies, specifically the matter of the US' asylum system. The [Washington Post](#) reported earlier that additional executive orders on the subject may be signed later Tuesday.

Having played a key role in the creation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, Mayorkas is also expected to help the Biden administration work out an immigration bill providing a pathway to legal status for millions of undocumented individuals.

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'We Will Hold the Games': Tokyo Organizer Vows to Host Olympic Tournament 'No Matter What' by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

At the onset of the pandemic, various sporting and entertainment events were canceled or postponed indefinitely as a means to curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes COVID-19. The 2020 Games were the first to be postponed in modern times, though they were also canceled during both world wars.

Tokyo 2020 President Yoshiro Mori reiterated on Tuesday that regardless of the current status of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Olympic Games will be held in Japan over the summer, as the initiative has also gained backing from the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Discussing matters before the start of a meeting with the country's Sports Research Commission, Mori told reporters that rather than the focus being on whether or not the games will be held, talks should be centered on how it will proceed.

"No matter what [the] situation would be with the coronavirus, we will hold the games," Mori said. "We should pass on the discussion of whether we will hold the games or not, but instead discuss how we should hold it."

The former Japanese prime minister further acknowledged that the two "biggest problems" before officials regard the public's opinion of the games and how organizers intend to implement effective measures that will prevent the spread of the deadly virus.

"These two points are our primary focus," Mori stressed.

[Recent polls](#) conducted by the Japanese news agency Kyodo and the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) found that over 80% of the island nation's residents were of the belief that the 2020 Games should be canceled or postponed. The figure is a sharp increase when compared to an earlier Kyodo survey that found [roughly 33%](#) of respondents agreed with the sentiment. Public opinion of the games have been largely influenced by the country's recent spike in COVID-19 case numbers, which prompted Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on Tuesday to extend Japan's state of emergency for one more month.

Tracking by [Worldometer](#) notes that COVID-19 cases have maintained a steady increase of new daily cases since last November, although data suggest that caseloads are on the decline. To date, Japan has documented nearly 392,000 novel coronavirus cases, with the majority of infected individuals recovering after receiving a positive COVID-19 diagnosis.

Both the IOC and Tokyo officials are set to release a guidebook on Wednesday that will provide athletes and game officials with an outline and clear explanation on what is expected before they depart for the weeklong festivities.

Although there was a push to cancel the tournament's historic torch relay over cost and safety concerns, Mori underscored that the event would proceed as planned with minor alterations to ensure social distancing measures were in place.

"Basically, shortening - like changing from three days to two days, or one day, is out of the question," he said. The [Associated Press](#) reported that talks to cancel the event were scrapped due to the "heavy sponsorship" from Coca-Cola and Toyota.

The [relay](#) will kick off on March 25 and see the torch make its way through approximately 859 municipalities before arriving at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo on July 23 to signal the start of the historic games.

Aside from the tens of thousands of judges and game officials, an estimated 11,000 athletes are expected to take part in the Tokyo Games, with another 4,400 athletes participating in the Paralympics.

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'Keep Inventing': Jeff Bezos Announces He Will Step Down as Amazon CEO
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Founded in 1994, Amazon has morphed from an online bookstore into a far-reaching, mega online retailer that sells and delivers products worldwide. Although known for its quick service, the company has repeatedly come under fire for its treatment of its workforce.

Amazon announced Tuesday that its longtime CEO Jeff Bezos is stepping down from the executive post and will be replaced by Andy Jassy, who has been running the company's cloud computing division.

The transition is expected to take place during the third quarter of 2021, which starts in July, and will see Bezos serve as the executive chair of Amazon's board.

In a [letter](#) issued to employees, Bezos indicated that he would be focusing his "energies and attention on new products and early initiatives," as he hands over the reins to Jassy, who Bezos stated would be "an outstanding leader."

"As much as I still tap dance into the office, I'm excited about this transition. Millions of customers depend on us for our services, and more than a million employees depend on us for their livelihoods," Bezos wrote. "Amazon couldn't be better positioned for the future. We are firing on all cylinders, just as the world needs us to. We have things in the pipeline that will continue to astonish."

"Keep inventing, and don't despair when at first the idea looks crazy. Remember to wander. Let curiosity be your compass," he urged.

The Amazon founder further noted that as an executive chair board member he would also be doubling down on his participation in the "Day 1 Fund, the Bezos Earth Fund, Blue Origin, The Washington Post, and my other passions."

Although Bezos has largely stepped away from the day-to-day business associated with the company, the onset of the pandemic forced the New Mexico native to begin picking up the work as the tech giant underwent supply and logistical setbacks.

Some pandemic-prompted issues Amazon faced included a lack of social distancing measures being implemented at its warehouses, a development which [saw thousands](#) of workers contract SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes COVID-19, and the company accused of risking its workers' health.

Reports highlighting Amazon's poor handling of its workforce are not unheard of. Prior to the pandemic alarms were repeatedly raised about the company's constant surveillance of workers, physically-demanding quotas, timed bathroom breaks and lack of pay, among others.

The [New York Times](#) reported that Bezos quickly began to hold daily briefings on inventory matters at the height of the pandemic and even made a visit to an Amazon fulfillment center. Bezos' surprise announcement came as Amazon finished its 2020 pandemic-fueled financial performance that saw quarterly sales skyrocket as stores were shuttered and shoppers were urged to stay indoors in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19.

The company reported that its fourth quarter sales amounted to \$125.5 billion, marking the first time Amazon surpassed the \$100 billion mark in quarterly sales. The e-commerce giant's net income reached \$7.2 billion.

As Jassy takes over the whole of Amazon's structure, he will be faced with guiding the company through antitrust concerns raised by both [US lawmakers](#) and the [European Union](#).

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Majority of Americans Believe Facebook Serves as Misinformation Central - Poll

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Amid ongoing investigations into the deadly Capitol riot, concerns have been raised over netizens' use of Facebook to spread conspiracy theories and misinformation on hot-button topics, such as the validity of the 2020 presidential election.

A Newsy/YouGov survey has determined that the majority of Americans believe social media giant Facebook serves as the hotbed for misinformation, despite efforts by the platform to moderate questionable content.

Commissioned by market research company [YouGov](#), the Monday-released survey determined that over 65% of polled American adults found that they regularly encountered misinformation while logged onto Facebook.

Misinformation found on Facebook topped any misleading information voiced by politicians, uncovered on Twitter, on cable news, online news sites, or broadcast television, according to the survey.

However, that does not necessarily indicate that they were complacent users since many of the 1,000-plus polled individuals revealed that action was taken in response, with many of those polled indicating they countered with content from legitimate news sources (35%), unfriended someone who spread misinformation (29.3%) or decided to quit at least one social media platform (20.4%).

Asked what they believed were the best options to combat misinformation, the majority of survey participants (56.8%) noted that platforms were best off by simply improving their moderation efforts. Others suggested that some reporters who shared misinformation should be suspended (52.6%), as over 50% suggested that banning influential individuals would be an effective countermeasure.

With the sudden spike in misinformation, only 24.5% of respondents acknowledged that their ability to detect false information had "significantly increased," whereas the majority (40%) indicated they were unable to detect a change.

The survey was conducted between January 22 and 25 as part of Newsy's participation in the National News Literacy Week. Information regarding the survey's margin of error was not provided.

The poll came as the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) over the weekend that Facebook executives have known for years that the platform's group pages allowed for the creation of toxic communities that spread misinformation and called for violence.

In fact, a document reviewed by the outlet revealed that researchers informed executives in August that daily "enthusiastic calls for violence" were voiced in one group that carried a 58,000-strong following. The findings further concluded that "70% of the top 100 most active US Civic Groups are considered non-recommendable for issues such as hate, misinfo, bullying and harassment."

As a result of the report, Facebook has enforced stricter methods to deter individuals from voicing false claims and bolstered moderation efforts; however, the company has noted that it still has a ways to go before being able to fully curb all misinformation posts.

Incidentally, the survey also came on the coattails of an ongoing critique of Facebook regarding its use of user data and how the company taps the information to push directed advertisements toward netizens.

In a bid to counter critics, Nick Clegg, Facebook's vice president of global affairs, issued an [open letter](#) Sunday stating that Facebook is by no means "controlling the minds" of its users. Clegg also took the opportunity to underscore that social media is not necessarily the "chief cause of rising polarization," as research shows that society was polarized before social media came along.

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Starship Goes Boom: Watch SpaceX Rocket Explode Upon Landing
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The previous test flight for SpaceX's Starship prototype took place in December and resulted in the rocket's highest and longest flight at the time. The Starship prototype Serial Number 8 (SN 8) reached around 40,000 feet altitude before exploding during its landing attempt.

The Starship prototype Serial Number 9 (SN 9) followed in the footsteps of its SN8 predecessor on Tuesday, when it exploded on impact during a high-altitude experimental launch in Boca Chica, Texas.

Video footage from the launch shows the stainless steel rocket's botched landing attempt. Congrats to [@SpaceX](#) for successfully launching and ALMOST landing [#SN9](#)! Incredible launch!
<pic.twitter.com/XEoZcwqZnn>

— Pookerly (@Pookerly) [February 2, 2021](#)

Closeup of SN9's landing (well kinda...)! 🌟

(Credit: [@LabPadre](#)) <pic.twitter.com/Rf3JM0SA6D>

— Everything SpaceX (@spacex360) [February 2, 2021](#)

"We had, again, another great flight up ... we've just got to work on that landing a little bit," said SpaceX principal integration engineer John Insprucker following the event, as reported [by CNBC](#).

"So all told, another great [flight] -- and a reminder, this is a test flight, the second time we've launched starship in this configuration," he remarked. "We've got a lot of good data, and [achieved] the primary objective to demonstrate control of the vehicle and the subsonic reentry." The full stream of the event has been uploaded to the official SpaceX YouTube channel.

The SN9 is said to have reached around six miles (more than 31,600 feet) before its descent and failed landing.

The aerospace company intends to use the fully-developed rocket to transport up to 100 people at a time during missions to Mars and the moon.

The US Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) said it will oversee the investigation of the failed launch.

"The FAA will oversee the investigation of today's landing mishap involving the SpaceX Starship SN9 prototype in Boca Chica, Texas," the agency said on Tuesday. "Although this was an uncrewed test flight, the investigation will identify the root cause of today's mishap and possible opportunities to further enhance safety as the program develops."

SpaceX's Tuesday launch took place shortly after the FAA confirmed the company's compliance with "safety and related federal regulations."

"The FAA determined late Monday (Feb. 1) that SpaceX complies with all safety and related federal regulations and is authorized to conduct Starship SN9 flight operations in accordance with its launch license," the FAA memo read, as reported [by CNBC](#).

The federal transportation agency had previously prohibited SpaceX from conducting new test launches due to a reported violation of its existing license during the SN8 launch in December.

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US Senate Confirms Buttigieg as Transportation Secretary in Broad Bipartisan Vote
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Senate Commerce Committee previously voted 21-3 in favor of advancing the confirmation process of former South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, Biden's nominee for secretary of transportation.

With a final vote of 86-13, the Senate on Tuesday confirmed Buttigieg to join US President Joe Biden's cabinet and head the US Department of Transportation.

U.S. Senate CONFIRMS Pete Buttigieg to be Secretary of Transportation, 86-13.

pic.twitter.com/RePDHPGnbG

— CSPAN (@cspan) [February 2, 2021](#)

Prior to the vote, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) took to the floor and spoke highly of the 39-year-old.

"Mr. Buttigieg is an impressive public servant who has already earned the respect and confidence of both sides," remarked Schumer. "I look forward to confirming his nomination."

Sen. Chuck Schumer: "We have a second outstanding nominee to confirm today as well, Pete Buttigieg for secretary of transportation... I'm excited to call him Secretary Pete by the end of the day." pic.twitter.com/WFxxoCsEwZ

— Forbes (@Forbes) [February 2, 2021](#)

While Buttigieg has received bipartisan support during his confirmation process, some lawmakers - like Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) - have opposed his confirmation to the cabinet.

The Texas lawmaker has particularly raised concerns about how the new US president's environmental push will impact American infrastructure, which Buttigieg will now oversee as transportation secretary.

"I will say it was disconcerting to see yesterday – the first day of the Biden administration – straight out of the gate, President Biden announced that he was canceling the Keystone Pipeline. That is a major infrastructure project," [he said](#) during Buttigieg's Senate Commerce Committee.

"That is a project that right now today has 1,200 good paying union jobs. And in 2021, the Keystone Pipeline was scheduled to have more than 11,000 jobs, including 8,000 union jobs, for contracts worth \$1.6 billion."

Buttigieg's bipartisan confirmation will make Buttigieg the first open member of the LGBTQ+ community to lead a department and hold a cabinet position.

Buttigieg will assume his role following the Biden administration's recent COVID-19-related entry bans. The US government has also begun requiring all passengers to wear facemasks on airplanes, trains and other forms of mass transportation.

The former Indiana mayor has previously pointed out that he is the first millennial to receive a cabinet nomination and stressed that "future generations have a lot at stake in infrastructure policy that, by its nature, must contemplate both the immediate and the long term."

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Photos: Trump 'Inspired' Capitol Riot, Claims Defense Team of Accused Rioter Facing Federal Charges

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Former US President Trump's legal team has denied the assertion that his January 6 call for supporters to "fight like hell" incited the deadly riot that took place soon after.

[Reuters reported](#) Tuesday that a recently-obtained court filing from defense attorney Brandi Harden argued the conduct of her client, 20-year-old Maryland native Emanuel Jackson, and others who stormed the Capitol building on January 6, should be viewed as a spontaneous event, rather than a domestic terror plot.

"[T]he nature and circumstances of this offense must be viewed through the lens of an event inspired by the President of the United States," Harden wrote in the January 22 filing.

Jackson's defense attorney went on to add that the riot itself "appears to have been spontaneous and sparked by the statements made during the 'Stop the Steal' rally."

Speaking to supporters on the morning of January 6, Trump notoriously proclaimed that widespread voter fraud occurred in the November presidential election. "We will not take it anymore," 45 told rally attendees.

He also asserted that supporters need to "fight like hell" to preserve the "country."

Harden's filing also requested that Jackson, who has been behind bars since turning himself in to DC's Metropolitan Police Department on January 18, be released from jail until his preliminary hearing in February.

However, a [judge rejected](#) the appeal and also denied bail for the 20-year-old, whose actions and assaults were captured via video and photos.

"I had a bat. They were pepper-spraying people. Then, they got me in the eye," [Jackson said](#) when interviewed amid the incident. "Fighting for America. We've been taken over by globalists, by the Chinese. Fighting for America. I'm not here for Trump. I'm here for America."

Unconfirmed reports have claimed the 20-year-old is homeless and has known mental health issues. Nevertheless, Jackson is facing a litany of charges, including "assault on a federal law

enforcement officer with a dangerous weapon; knowingly engaging in any acts of physical violence against any person or property in any restricted building or grounds; and knowingly entering or remaining in a restricted building or grounds without lawful authority.”

The 20-year-old also admitted in now-viral footage that he did not vote in the 2020 presidential election because he believed his "vote didn't count."

"But I learned a lesson, and I will vote next in the midterms and in other elections," he asserted. While Jackson surrendered to authorities, many riot suspects - like Bryan Betancur - were jailed after being tracked down. Betancur, also a Maryland resident, was easily located by law enforcement officers due to a court-appointed GPS monitor, which also placed him at the Capitol during the January 6 riot.

Despite his presence around the federal building that day, Betancur's parole office told the Federal Bureau of Investigation that he was granted permission to sell bibles in Washington, DC, with evangelical Christian association Gideon International.

However, [photos on social media](#), coupled with archived GPS data, suggest that he was doing more than selling bibles. A federal affidavit obtained by [CBS Baltimore](#) highlighted that Betancur has previously expressed "homicidal ideations, made comments about conducting a school shooting and has researched mass shootings."

The filing also notes that Betancur has claimed allegiance to several white supremacist groups. Federal authorities have charged Betancur with a number of [offenses](#), including unlawful activity on Capitol Grounds. If found guilty, the Maryland resident's parole violation will likely result in harsher punishment than usual.

As riot-related arrests and federal charges continued to be announced, the nine Democratic House impeachment managers issued a [pre-trial brief](#) on Tuesday that urged US senators to convict Trump for engaging "in high Crimes and Misdemeanors by inciting violence against the Government of the United States."

Even if all 50 Democratic senators vote to convict the US president on the single article of impeachment, the conviction threshold calls for a total of 67 votes - meaning 17 Republicans would have to vote "yay."

"President Trump's conduct offends everything that the Constitution stands for," the Democratic impeachment managers wrote in their 80-page memo.

"The Senate must make clear to him and all who follow that a President who provokes armed violence against the government of the United States in an effort to overturn the results of an election will face trial and judgment."

"The 45th President of the United States performed admirably in his role as president, at all times doing what he thought was in the best interests of the American people," Trump's legal team claims.

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REVIEW - Biden Moves to Dismantle Trump Immigration Legacy Amid Calls for More Immediate Action

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed multiple executive orders designed to take steps towards reversing much of the Trump administration's hardline immigration agenda, although many activists feel the change is too slow and far short of what is required.

BIDEN'S ORDERS

The number one target on Biden's list was the previous government's family separation policy. Under former President Donald Trump, the US Justice Department 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.

Some 5,500 migrant families were separated as a result of the policy. The US government is reportedly still trying to find the parents of more than 600 children.

Biden signed three executive orders including one that called for the creation of a task force to reunify separated families.

The other measures include the establishment of a regional framework that would address root causes of immigration, and a comprehensive review of recent regulations and practices.

"With the first action today, we're going to work to undo the moral and national shame of the previous administration that literally, not figuratively, ripped children from the arms of their families, mothers, and fathers at the border with no plan, none whatsoever, to reunify the children, who are still in custody, and their parents," Biden said in the Oval Office on Tuesday.

CALLS FOR MORE

The White House, seeming to anticipate criticism, tried to manage expectations and went so far as to warn migrants not to come to the United States because it will take time to implement Biden's program.

"It remains a dangerous trip. It remains a [question of] time. It is not the time to come to the United States. We need to take the time to put in place an immigration process, so people can be treated humanely," White House spokesperson Psaki said at a press briefing.

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Director of Immigrants Rights Project, Omar Jadwat, said he found it "troubling" that Biden's orders on Tuesday did not include immediate action to rescind the inhumane policies he inherited.

Lead lawyer in the family separation lawsuit against Trump, the ACLU's Lee Gelernt, also felt the Biden administration was moving too slowly in the face of the crisis.

"All 5,500-plus separated families need immediate action - they cannot wait 120 days for a task force to make recommendations," Gelernt said in a statement. "These families deserve citizenship, care, and resources."

Border Network for Human Rights Executive Director Fernando Garcia, although applauding the orders Biden signed, demanded more action to more effectively provide support to asylum-seeking migrants.

"We urge President Biden to take immediate action to increase our capacity and build the necessary infrastructure to process asylum claims, address the needs of families seeking safe haven at our borders, and help them fully integrate into our communities," Garcia said on Tuesday.

REPUBLICAN BACKLASH

Several Republicans came forward to not only slam Biden's immigration orders but also accused the president of abusing executive power and circumventing US Congress. Biden, however, quickly shot down the allegations.

"I'm not making new law. I'm eliminating bad policy," Biden said after signing the orders during a ceremony at the White House.

To put the criticism in perspective, it is important to note that Trump signed 400 immigration-related executive actions, according to Politico.

Meanwhile, also on Tuesday, the US Senate confirmed Alejandro Mayorkas to be the next Secretary of Homeland Security by a 56-43 vote. He is the first immigrant in US history to head the department.

On his first day, his department was under fire. The decision to halt enforcement actions that would threaten migrant access to vaccines drew rebukes from Republicans.

"Biden's plan to vaccinate illegal immigrants ahead of Americans who are currently being denied the COVID-19 vaccine is a slap in the face to millions of hard-working families who have been waiting months for the vaccine and expect Washington leaders to be looking out for them," House Republican Whip Steve Scalise said in a statement on Tuesday.

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US Advocacy Group Urges Biden to Do More to Address Immigration Policy Concerns
WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - Border Network for Human Rights Executive Director Fernando Garcia in a statement praised President Joe Biden for taking executive action to reunite migrants families separated at the southern border under the Trump administration, but he urged the administration to take further action to more effectively provide support to asylum-seeking migrants.

Earlier on Tuesday, Biden signed an executive order that creates a task force to work on reuniting migrant families separated at the southern border under the previous administration's "zero-tolerance" policy.

"We are encouraged to see the Biden administration's commitment to helping families torn apart at the border... We urge President Biden to take immediate action to increase our capacity and build the necessary infrastructure to process asylum claims, address the needs of families seeking safe haven at our borders, and help them fully integrate into our communities," Garcia said on Tuesday.

More than 1,000 migrant families were separated in 2017 under the policy. In October, US media reported, citing the American Civil Liberties Union, that the Trump administration was unable to find the parents of nearly 600 migrant children in US custody.

Biden also signed executive orders to address the root causes of migration to the US southern border and to conduct a full review of the Trump administration's immigration policies, Biden said.

Biden on his first day in office on January 20 took executive action to halt the ongoing construction of the border wall and to suspend the Migrant Protection Protocols program, also known as the Remain in Mexico policy, while his team reviews the Trump-era policies.

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US Federal Aviation Agency to Oversee Probe of SpaceX Prototype Rocket Crash - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) said it will oversee the investigation of the failed launch of the SpaceX Starship SN9 prototype.

On Tuesday, SpaceX's prototype rocket exploded while attempting to land, which is the second time the test flight of this prototype rocket has ended in an explosion.

"The FAA will oversee the investigation of today's landing mishap involving the SpaceX Starship SN9 prototype in Boca Chica, Texas," the agency said on Tuesday. "Although this was an uncrewed test flight, the investigation will identify the root cause of today's mishap and possible opportunities to further enhance safety as the program develops."

The SN9 spacecraft is a fully reusable transportation system designed to carry both crew and cargo to Earth's orbit, the Moon, Mars and beyond, according to SpaceX.

The first incident with the spacecraft occurred in December.

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Yellen Tells IMF Chief She Will Work Closely With Fund on COVID-19 Response - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in a telephone call with International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva vowed to work closely with the Fund to fight the pandemic, the Treasury Department said in a press release.

"Earlier today, Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen spoke with IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva. Secretary Yellen conveyed her intention to work closely with the IMF on the priorities of continuing to respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic, re-invigorating economic growth to support a strong global recovery," the release said on Tuesday.

Both leaders also discussed the need to find multilateral solutions to address debt problems and supporting recovery in low-income countries. Yellen also highlighted the threat of climate change in her call with Georgieva, the release said.

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US Treasury Chief Discusses Economic, Security Issues With Mexican Counterpart - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in a telephone call with her Mexican counterpart discussed the need to continue cooperation on bilateral economic and security matters, the Treasury Department said in a press release.

"Earlier today, Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen spoke with Mexican Finance Minister Arturo Herrera Gutierrez. Secretary Yellen expressed her desire to continue the tradition of close U.S.-Mexico coordination on economic and security issues," the release said on Tuesday. Yellen said Mexico can be a strong US partner in combating illicit finance and facilitating economic development in Central America, the release said.

Yellen laid out her priorities to Herrera, which include containing the coronavirus pandemic, spurring economic recovery, and addressing climate change, the release said.

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US Seeking to Seize Iranian Oil on Liberian Vessel Achilleas - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is seeking to seize Iranian oil loaded on a Liberian vessel under US terrorism forfeiture laws, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"The United States filed a forfeiture complaint in the US District Court for the District of Columbia alleging that all oil aboard a Liberian-flagged vessel, the M/T Achilleas (Achilleas), is subject to forfeiture based on US terrorism forfeiture laws," the release said on Tuesday. Multiple entities with ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the IRGC Qods Force covertly shipped oil overseas by hiding the origin of the oil through ship-to-ship transfers, falsified documents, and other methods to deceive the owners of the Achilleas into loading the oil, the release said.

The release added that the IRGC uses profits from the oil sales to support terrorism and Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile program.

The IRGC and the Qods Force have been designated by the United States as foreign terrorist organizations.

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UPDATE 2 - FBI Agents Killed Serving Warrant in Florida, Biden Briefed, Offers Condolences

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The FBI confirmed two of its agents were killed and three others sustained injuries in a shooting while they were serving a search warrant in Florida. "Two FBI agents are deceased and three are wounded. Two wounded agents were transported to hospital and are in stable condition," the agency said in a statement Tuesday. "The names of the deceased will not be released at this time."

The FBI also said in the statement that the suspected shooter is deceased.

The FBI explained that the shooting took place at approximately 6:00 a.m. in Sunrise, Florida, when a team of agents were trying to execute "a federal court-ordered search warrant in furtherance of a violent crimes against children case."

The shooting incident is being investigated by the FBI's Inspection Division, the statement said. The warrant was related to a child pornography case under investigation by the FBI, local media reported.

The media reported earlier that the suspect was believed to have barricaded and killed himself. Later in the day, President Joe Biden at a presser said he was briefed on the matter and offered condolences to the family's.

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US Suspends Enforcement Actions That Threaten Migrant Access to COVID-19 Vaccine - DHS

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US urged illegal immigrants to line up for COVID-19 vaccinations alongside of American citizens with a promise from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that there will be no arrests or deportations.

"It is a moral and public health imperative to ensure that all individuals residing in the United States have access to the vaccine," DHS announced in a press release on Tuesday. "ICE does not and will not carry out enforcement operations at or near health care facilities, such as hospitals, doctors' offices, accredited health clinics, and emergent or urgent care facilities, except in the most extraordinary of circumstances."

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency is a division of DHS.

DHS also said its US Customs and Border Protection will not conduct "enforcement operations" near vaccination sites.

DHS concluded its announcement by saying it is "committed to ensuring that every individual who needs a vaccine can get one, regardless of their immigration status."

In a sharp reversal from the Trump administration, President Joe Biden has promised to pursue a path to citizenship for an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants who have lived in the US for years, if not decades.

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US, Russia Sign Plan For Joint Pollution Responses in Arctic - Coast Guard

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States and Russia will coordinate responses to pollution along maritime boundaries in the Arctic's Bering and Chukchi Seas with a updated joint contingency plan (JCP), the US Coast Guard said in a statement.

"The updated JCP promotes a coordinated system for planning, preparing and responding to pollutant substance incidents in the waters between the US and Russia," the release said Tuesday.

Russia's Marine Rescue Service acting Director Andrey Khaustov and the Coast Guard deputy commandant for operations, Vice Admiral Scott Buschman signed the agreement, which updates an accord on trans-boundary marine pollution preparedness and response that dates back to 1989, the Coast Guard said.

The newest JCP revision requires joint planning and trans-boundary exercise efforts to be coordinated by a Joint Planning Group over the next two years. The agreement is intended to augment each nation's national response system, as well as state, regional, and local plans, according to the Coast Guard.

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Biden Signs Orders to Undo Trump Immigration Policies, Reunite Migrant Families

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has signed three executive orders to address concerns over the Trump administration's immigration policies, including one to reunite migrant families separated at the southern border under the previous administration's zero tolerance policy.

"With the first action today, we're going to work to undo the moral and national shame of the previous administration that literally, not figuratively, ripped children from the arms of their families, mothers, and fathers at the border with no plan, none whatsoever, to reunify the children, who are still in custody, and their parents," Biden said in the Oval Office on Tuesday. Biden said the second executive order he signed will address the root causes of migration to the US southern border. The third executive order directs a full review of the Trump administration's immigration policies, Biden said.

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.

Last week, US acting Attorney General Monty Wilkinson formally terminated the Trump administration's so-called zero tolerance immigration policy. More than 1,000 migrant families were separated in 2017 under the so-called zero-tolerance policy.

In October, US media reported, citing the American Civil Liberties Union, that the Trump administration is unable to find the parents of nearly 600 migrant children in US custody. Biden on his first day in office on January 20 took executive action to halt the ongoing construction of the border wall and to suspend the Migrant Protection Protocols program, also known as the Remain in Mexico policy, while his team reviews the Trump-era policies.

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Russian Embassy Calls Canada Navalny Comments 'Unacceptable' Meddling in Judicial Process

TORONTO, February 2 (Sputnik) - The Russian Embassy in Ottawa says comments by Canadian officials concerning the prison sentence handed down to Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny are unacceptable and constitute interference in Russia's sovereign affairs. Earlier on Tuesday, a Moscow court handed the blogger a three-and-a-half-year prison term for violating the terms of his probation. Canadian officials, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Foreign Minister Marc Garneau, have condemned the ruling and called for Navalny's immediate release.

"Latest [Government of Canada] comments on the decision of the Russian court is another unacceptable attempt to meddle in Russian internal affairs and put pressure on judicial process," the embassy said in a statement on Tuesday via Twitter.

The embassy added independence of the legislative branch is at the core of Russian governance and that while court decisions may seem "harsh" they have to be respected. In 2014, Alexey Navalny and his brother Oleg were indicted on charges of embezzlement in dealings with the Russian subsidiary of French cosmetics company, Yves Rocher. At the time Navalny received a three-and-a-half-year suspended sentence, with one of the conditions being that he check in with the police in person at least twice a month.

In 2019, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that Navalny's house arrest during the Yves Rocher case trial breached several provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights but declined to recognize the case as politically motivated.

The Russian Foreign Ministry previously advised foreign politicians commenting on the Navalny situation to respect international law and pay attention to the issues in their countries.

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US Urges China to End Military, Economic Pressure Against Taiwan - State Department

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States urges China to end its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"We urge Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan and instead engage in meaningful dialogue with Taiwan's democratically-elected leadership," Price said during a press briefing Tuesday.

Price's comment was made in response to recent remarks from Chinese Politburo Yang Jiechi, who is regarded as one of the main Chinese foreign policy architects. Yang said Beijing was committed to win-win cooperation with the United States but Washington must refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of China.

Yang said that policymakers in Washington must understand and respect that the US and China, as the two largest economies that are intricately linked, have vastly different histories and paths of development.

The Biden administration is currently reviewing all the foreign policies put in place by the Trump administration, including the trade deal with China.

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Biden Told Republicans \$600Bln Recovery Package Far Too Small - Senate Majority Leader

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has told Senate Republicans that the \$600 billion economic recovery package they favor for dealing with the COVID-19 crisis is far too small, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told a Capitol Hill press conference.

"We had a very good [Senate Democrats] caucus meeting," Schumer said Tuesday. "He told [the Senate] Republicans that the \$600 billion package they had proposed was far too small." Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellin accompanied Biden to the Senate Democratic caucus meeting and she agreed that a \$600 billion stimulus package was not remotely enough, Schumer said.

Biden's American Rescue Plan (ARP), which he proposed on January 14, would pump a record \$1.9 trillion into the US economy to seek to jump start it from the economic devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic over the past year.

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UN Mission to Assess Abandoned Oil Tanker In Yemen Delayed Again - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 2 (Sputnik) - The deployment of the UN team to assess the Safer oil tanker anchored off the Yemeni coast planned for early March is delayed again, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

The spokesman explained the United Nations had requested the Houthi authorities controlling the area nearby the tanker to provide a letter with security assurances to facilitate the leasing of technically equipped service vessels. The organization's has not been able to receive a response to its multiple requests.

"In light of these challenges, the timeline of deployment of the mission remains uncertain and dependent on the continued facilitation of all stakeholders involved," Dujarric said on Tuesday. Dujarric noted that the lack of the letter would also increase the cost of the mission by hundreds of thousands of dollars. The preparation of the mission has already cost the United Nations \$3. million.

Besides, there have been indications that the Houthis consider reviewing their formal approval of the mission granted in November, Dujarric said.

"Houthi officials have advised the UN to pause certain preparations pending the outcome of such process, which would create further delays to the mission," he added.

The spokesman said that the United Nations hopes to receive a renewed green light from the Houthis to resolve the matter at the soonest convenience as any other outcome would be "extremely disappointing."

The Safer tanker, loaded with 1.1 million barrels of oil, is anchored in the Red Sea. The vessel in poor condition and a potential leak or explosion could cause catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects to the area around the port of Al-Hudaydah.

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Biden's Top Security Adviser, Spanish Official Discuss Cooperation on China - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Spanish diplomatic adviser Emma Aparici agreed the two countries would cooperate on China, Latin America and the Sahel region, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke by phone today with Emma Aparici, Chief Diplomatic Advisor to the President of Spain," Horne said. "They agreed to work together on shared foreign policy priorities, including China, Latin America, and the Sahel. "

Sullivan underscored the Biden administration's commitment to strengthening the US-Spain relationship, the NSC spokesperson continued. Sullivan and Aparici "also discussed the importance of partnership on common global challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change," Horne said.

Sullivan also expressed appreciation for Spain's continued hosting of US military forces, she added.

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Trudeau Calls for Release of Navalny, Peaceful Protesters

TORONTO, February 2 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is calling for the immediate release of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny who was handed a three-and-a-half-year prison term by a Moscow court for violating the terms of his probation. "Canada strongly condemns Russia's imprisonment of Alexei Navalny. We call for his immediate release, as well as the release of the peaceful protestors and journalists who have been detained in recent weeks. The justice system must never be abused for political purposes," Trudeau said in a statement on Tuesday via Twitter.

In 2014, Alexey Navalny and his brother Oleg were indicted on charges of embezzlement in dealings with the Russian subsidiary of French cosmetics company Yves Rocher. Alexey got a 3.5-year suspended sentence, with one of the conditions being that he check in with the police in person at least twice a month.

In 2019, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that Navalny's house arrest during the Yves Rocher case trial breached several provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights but declined to recognize the case as politically motivated.

The Russian Foreign Ministry previously advised foreign politicians commenting on the Navalny situation to respect international law and pay attention to the issues in their countries.

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US F-15 Upgrade Completes Test Flight Allowing Delivery of First 2 Aircraft - Boeing

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The F-15Ex, the latest version of the US fighter jet designed to incorporate advances in battle management systems and weapons, completed its first test flight ahead of a scheduled delivery of the first two aircraft, Boeing said.

"The fighter's digital backbone means it can serve as a testbed for future technology insertion, a key capability for the Air Force," Boeing said in a press release on Tuesday. "The F-15EX, the most advanced version to date, features the Eagle Passive/Active Warning and Survivability System electronic warfare system to improve mission effectiveness and survivability for operators."

In July, the Air Force awarded Boeing a contract to build the first lot of eight jets. Future plans call for as many as 144 aircraft, Boeing said.

With the successful completion of a 90 minute test flight, Boeing said it plans to proceed with plans to deliver the first two aircraft to the Air Force later this quarter.

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US to Impose Anti-Dumping Duties on Vertical Shaft Engines From China - Trade Commission

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department will impose duties on large vertical shaft engines from China because they are being sold at below fair value, a government trade panel said after determining Beijing's actions hurt American companies. "The United States International Trade Commission today determined that a US industry is materially injured by reason of imports of large vertical shaft engines from China that the US Department of Commerce has determined are subsidized and sold in the United States at less than fair value," the agency said on Tuesday. "As a result of the Commission's affirmative determinations, Commerce will issue antidumping and countervailing duty orders on imports of these products from China."

Large vertical shaft engines are commonly used in lawn mowers.

Under the Commission's rules, foreign companies that price their products in the US market below the cost of production or below prices in their home markets are subject to anti-dumping duties.

In 2019, imports of vertical shaft engines from China were valued at an estimated \$45.1 million. Data for 2020 is not available as yet.

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US Lawmakers Ask Biden to Lift Freeze on COVID-19 Related Subsidies to Farmers

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers in a letter urged President Biden to lift a freeze on payments from the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) to American farmers, who have been forced by pandemic-related bottlenecks to cull livestock and dump milk they were unable to move to market.

"While we understand the desire of a new administration to review rulemakings underway before continuing, we do not see fit to suspend such an important and timely program – necessary for stabilizing infrastructures," the letter signed by 15 House lawmakers said Tuesday.

In January, the Biden administration suspended the CFAP as part of a White House review of Trump administration regulations and rulemaking.

At stake is about \$2.28 billion in payments due to farmers to compensate for disruptions in the food supply chain due to COVID-19 that have forced them to take drastic measures, including dumping excess milk and culling livestock herds, according to the Agriculture Department.

Prior to the freeze, the CFAP distributed about \$23.6 billion in payments during the pandemic in two iterations of the program, an Agriculture Department website said.

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US Decision to Move USS Nimitz Will Not Affect Posture in Middle East - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The decision to move the USS Nimitz carrier strike group from the Middle East to the Indo-PACOM area of responsibility will not affect the US military presence in the region, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Tuesday.

"The Secretary [of Defense Lloyd Austin] believes that we have the robust presence in the Middle East to respond," Kirby said on Tuesday.

Austin is concerned over maintaining capabilities of US forces overseas in order to deter conflicts and had the "larger geostrategic picture" when he approved the movement of the Nimitz group, he added.

Kirby declined to provide information on the carrier's future presence in the Middle East.

"I do not have announcement on the presence of carriers in that part of the world," he said.

US military officials said earlier that Austin over weekend ordered Nimitz to come back to the US after almost eight-month-long trip.

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Jeff Bezos to Step Down as CEO of Amazon - Email to Staff

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Amazon's Jeff Bezos in an email to employees said he is stepping down from his role as Chief Executive Officer of the company.

"I'm excited to announce that this Q3 I'll transition to Executive Chair of the Amazon Board and Andy Jassy will become CEO," Bezos said in the email on Tuesday.

The entrepreneur said being the CEO of Amazon distracts him from paying attention to other initiatives.

Bezos said his role as the executive chair of the Amazon board of directors will allow him to stay engaged with the company while also dedicating time to focus on the Day 1 Fund, the Bezos Earth Fund, Blue Origin, The Washington Post, and other matters.

Bezos said his decision to step down from being CEO is not hinting at retirement.

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No US Officials Have Had Contact With Iran Since Biden Took Office - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - No US officials have been in contact with Iranian officials since the Biden administration came into power last month, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"The answer is no," Price said Tuesday when asked if any State Department officials have been in contact with Iranian officials since January 20.

Moreover, Price said it is too early to consider Iran's proposal to revive the nuclear deal, adding "we are a long way from that."

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif proposed that EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, who is a coordinator of the joint commission on Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) implementation, could play a coordinating role in establishing the Iran-US dialogue on returning to the nuclear deal.

Earlier on Tuesday, EU spokesman Peter Stano said the European Union is underway with efforts aimed at removing the unilateral US sanctions against Iran.

In January, US State Secretary then-nominee Antony Blinken said that the United States would reciprocate Iran's resumed compliance with the nuclear deal, but would seek a broader agreement that also covers its missile program. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif responded by ruling out any revisions to the original deal and insisting that Washington remove sanctions first.

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US National Security Advisor Voices Concerns Over Turkey's S-400 Purchases - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in a phone call with the Chief Advisor to the President of Turkey Ibrahim Kalin said that Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system undermines NATO effectiveness, the White House said.

"He conveyed the administration's intention to strengthen transatlantic security through NATO, expressing concern that Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system undermines alliance cohesion and effectiveness," the White House said on Tuesday in a readout of the call.

The United States has barred Turkey from acquiring US-made F-35 fifth generation fighter jets and imposed sanctions against Ankara under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for purchasing the Russian system. The restrictions targeted four affiliates of the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries, including its head, Ismail Demir. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken vowed earlier to take a look at the impact of the existing sanctions and determine "whether there is more that needs to be done."

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SpaceX Prototype Rocket Explodes Upon Landing

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - SpaceX's Starship prototype rocket exploded while attempting to land, a video clip showed.

The spacecraft that exploded on Tuesday is a fully reusable transportation system designed to carry both crew and cargo to Earth's orbit, the Moon, Mars and beyond, according to SpaceX. The previous test flight ended in an explosion in December.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) -

US RESPONSE TO MYANMAR COUP

* The United States will review its foreign aid contributions to Myanmar and its sanctions regime against the country's military leaders involved in the overthrow of the government, a senior State Department official said on Tuesday.

* The US Defense Department does not see the need to play a role in Myanmar, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby told reporters.

* US Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell on Tuesday said he talked to President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken about the need for a response to the Myanmar coup, adding that he expects the United States to immediately impose sanctions against Myanmar's military leaders.

NAVALNY CASE

* The Simonovsky Court of Moscow on Tuesday canceled Alexey Navalny's suspended sentence in the Yves Rocher case and replaced it with 3.5 year prison sentence, a Sputnik correspondent reported from a visiting session in the Moscow City Court.

* The Simonovsky Court of Moscow left Navalny in custody after replacing his suspended sentence with a prison term.

* Navalny's legal defense team will appeal the Moscow court's decision, lawyer Vadim Kobzev told Sputnik.

* The United States will closely coordinate with its allies and partners on the Navalny court ruling, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

NO PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY IN ITALY

* The head of the Italian Chamber of Deputies Roberto Fico said on Tuesday that he failed to find a new parliamentary majority that could help form a new government led by Giuseppe Conte.

PUTIN-FERNANDEZ TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke with his Argentine counterpart Alberto Fernandez, who thanked him for shipments of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus, the Kremlin said Tuesday.

* Fernandez has promised Putin to come to Russia, the Argentine leader's office said.

US FOREIGN POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

* The United States urges China to end its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

* No US officials have been in contact with Iranian officials since the Biden administration came into power last month and it is too early to consider Tehran's proposal to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement, Price said.

NORD STREAM 2

* The United States has for the first time ever shown readiness to start negotiations on lifting sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, German newspaper Handelsblatt reported on Tuesday, citing a source in the Biden administration.

* The German government does not believe there are many possibilities to give in to the US demands on Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, Handelsblatt reported.

* The United States wants to ensure that the Nord Stream 2 pipeline with Russian gas can be temporarily turned if Russia's gas transit via Ukraine is somehow limited, Handelsblatt reported.

FBI AGENTS KILLED IN FLORIDA

* The FBI confirmed on Tuesday that two of its agents were killed and three others got injured in a shooting while they were serving a warrant in Florida.

UNAUTHORIZED RALLIES IN RUSSIA

* A representative of the Swedish Embassy took part in unauthorized rallies in Russia, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Tuesday.

* The Moscow police began detaining participants at the unauthorized rally at the city's Manezhnaya Square, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

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Biden Admin Studying US Return to Open Skies Treaty With Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US administration of President Joe Biden is studying the issue of returning to the Open Skies Treaty with Russia and will take a decision in due course, US Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"We're studying the issue. We'll make a decision in due course. To the best of our knowledge, Russia is still not in full compliance with the treaty," Price said during a press briefing, when asked whether the United States consider returning to the Open Skies Treaty.

Russia began its withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty in January, following a US decision last year to pull out of the accord.

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US Has Made No Decisions on Military Postures in Iraq, Afghanistan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has not yet decided on its military postures in either Iraq or Afghanistan, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby told reporters on Tuesday.

"I think the current level in Iraq is around 2,500 - I have no changes to that to report out to you today," Kirby said.

With regards to Afghanistan, Kirby said "no posture decisions have been made" and the US remains committed to a political settlement.

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US Veterans Agency Vaccines Over 1M In Ex-Service Members, Staff - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US Veterans Administration (VA) reached a COVID-19 vaccination milestone with the inoculation of 1 million former service members and staff, the department said on Tuesday.

"As of Feb. 2, VA has dispensed at least one dose of either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine to more than 582,000 Veterans and has fully vaccinated over 44,000, totaling more than 626,000 doses. This is in addition to administering more than 401,000 doses to VA employees, and more than 1,200 vaccine doses to federal partners," the VA said in a press release.

The VA said it is providing vaccines at more than 215 sites nationally with plans to expand to additional sites as vaccine supplies increase.

However, the agency also said it faces a limited supply, as with individual states, in which many of its sites run out of vaccines for short periods of time.

The VA operates 1,255 health care facilities serving 9 million enrolled veterans each year, according to an agency website.

As of Tuesday morning, the Centers for Disease Control reported that 26 million Americans had received one or two shots from nearly 50 million vaccine doses that have been distributed so far.

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State Dept. Hopes Russia Returns Detainees Whelan, Reed to US - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US State Department hopes that Russia will return detained American citizens Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed to the United States, spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We continue to be seriously concerned over the treatment of American citizens Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed. Both men traveled to Russia as tourists, were arrested and were then convicted without credible evidence. We hope Russia will do the right thing and return them to their families in the United States," Price said.

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Trudeau Signs Deal for First Made-in-Canada COVID-19 Vaccine

TORONTO, February 2 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government signed an agreement with Novavax to produce its COVID-19 vaccine in Montreal, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday.

Should the preliminary agreement be finalized, Novavax would become the first drugmaker to produce their COVID-19 vaccine in Canada. The Novavax COVID-19 vaccine candidate has not received regulatory approval in Canada yet.

"We've signed a memorandum of understanding with Novavax to produce their COVID-19 vaccines at the new [National Research Council] Royalmount facility in Montreal," Trudeau told reporters in Ottawa.

Production will not begin at least until July, when the NRC's Royalmount facility is slated to open, and will come at the tail end of Canada's vaccination strategy. Trudeau has promised that all Canadians who wish to be immunized against the disease will be able to do so by September.

The prime minister said the Novavax vaccine will prove to be useful in dealing with possible future outbreaks or different strains.

Later in the day, Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry François-Philippe Champagne told reporters the government expects to be producing vaccines by the end of the year.

Trudeau has previously lamented the lack of domestic vaccine production capability and expressed concern that countries which have a viable vaccine candidate available will prioritize their citizens ahead of exports abroad, a fear that has come to fruition with vaccine nationalism growing.

Canada is experiencing a vaccine shortage that worsened after producer Pfizer halted delivery to the country last week following an announcement that another producer, Moderna, will deliver

50,000 less vaccine doses this week. The Trudeau government has received the brunt of the criticism for the lackluster vaccine rollout that the opposition has condemned as a failure.

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Pentagon Does Not Foresee Need for US Military Solution in Myanmar - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department does not see the need for the American military to have a role in Myanmar, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby told reporters on Tuesday.

"I don't believe we foresee right now with what's going on there a US military solution or action required," Kirby said. "We certainly have viewed with great alarm what has happened in Burma [Myanmar] but I don't see a US military role right now."

Myanmar's military launched a coup on Monday morning and detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other senior members of the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military announced a one-year state of emergency in the country, vowing to "take action" against alleged voter fraud during the November 8 general election, which the NLD party won. The military said it was committed to the democratic system and vowed to hold new and fair elections when the state of emergency ends.

Earlier on Tuesday, the United States assessed the events in Myanmar to have constituted a military coup, paving the way to imposing sanctions. The United States has already imposed sanctions on some of Myanmar's military leaders for role in the Rohingya humanitarian crisis. A senior State Department official said US officials have not had direct contact with any of the detained Myanmar officials. The United States is coordinating with allies and partners, including Japan and India, to address the situation.

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US Urges China to End Military, Economic Pressure Against Taiwan - State Department

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States urges China to end its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"We urge Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan and instead engage in meaningful dialogue with Taiwan's democratically-elected leadership," Price said during a press briefing.

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No US Officials Have Had Contact With Iran Since Biden Took Office - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - No US officials have been in contact with Iranian officials since the Biden administration came into power last month, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"The answer is no," Price said when asked if any State Department officials have been in contact with Iranian officials since January 20.

Moreover, Price said it is too early to consider Iran's proposal to revive the nuclear deal, adding "we are a long way from that."

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US-Israel Relations Important Despite No Biden-Netanyahu Call - White House

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US relations with Israel are important despite the absence of a phone conversation between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"I don't know if it's surprising less than two weeks into an administration. He hasn't called every foreign leader yet. He certainly would love spending more time talking to foreign leaders," Psaki told reporters. "Obviously we have a long and binding relationship with Israel, important security relationship. I am sure he will discuss that and a range of issues when they two connect."

Netanyahu, who is facing elections in March, had a series of public disagreements with the Barack Obama administration where Biden served as Vice President.

She added that Biden will continue to have "additional engagements" with world leaders in the weeks ahead.

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Biden to Speak on Foreign Policy at US State Department on Thursday - White House

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will deliver a major foreign policy speech during his visit at the State Department on Thursday, White House spokeswoman Jan Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"We can confirm that the President will visit the State Department now on Thursday," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

Biden will thank "the men and women of the national security work force for their service to our country" and deliver remarks about "reclaiming America's role in the world," she added.

The visit was originally scheduled for Monday but postponed due to a snowstorm in Washington, DC.

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US Working 'Very Expeditiously' to Complete Review of Russia's Activity - State Dept.
WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence is working very expeditiously to complete the assessment of Russia's activities, US Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We are working on this review and I should say, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence is working on this review very expeditiously," Price said.

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Pentagon Does Not Foresee Need for US Military Solution in Myanmar - Spokesman

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US Intends to Restore Humanitarian Aid to Palestinian People - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Washington intends to restore humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people reversing former President Donald Trump's decision to suspend such support, US Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Tuesday. "The United States does intend to restore humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people," Price said. "We're not doing that as a favor, but because it's in the interest of the United States to do so."

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US Senate Confirms Alejandro Mayorkas to Be Next Secretary of Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Tuesday confirmed Alejandro Mayorkas to be the next Secretary of Homeland Security.

A majority of lawmakers in the US Senate voted in favor of confirming Mayorkas' nomination, with voting still underway. Mayorkas is the first immigrant to run the Department of Homeland Security.

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US Authorizes Transactions Necessary to Venezuela Port, Airport Operations - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has issued a license allowing certain transaction essential to the operations of ports and airports in Venezuela, the Treasury Department said in an order on Tuesday.

The order from the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control modifies the terms two executive orders issued by former US President Donald Trump that targeted assets held by the Venezuelan government, President Nicolas Maduro or anyone affiliated with the government or the president.

"Except as provided in paragraph (c) of this general license, all transactions and activities involving the Government of Venezuela prohibited by Executive Order (E.O.) 13884 of August 5, 2019, as incorporated into the Venezuela Sanctions Regulations, 31 C.F.R. part 591 (the VSR), that are ordinarily incident and necessary to operations or use of ports and airports in Venezuela are authorized," the order signed by Bradley Smith, the Acting Director of the Office of Foreign Assets Control, said.

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New York State Expedites Vaccine for Taxi Drivers, Restaurant Workers - Cuomo

* NEW YORK, February 2 (Sputnik) - New York State is allowing its regional authorities to expedite coronavirus vaccinations for drivers of taxis and ride-sharing services, as well as for those working in restaurants and centers for the disabled, Governor Andrew Cuomo said during a briefing o the state's COVID-19 status and vaccination progress Tuesday.

"If a local government ... wants to prioritize taxi drivers, Uber drivers and developmentally-disabled facilities and restaurant workers ... it's going to be up to the local government," Cuomo said. But regional authorities had to ensure they had adequate vaccine doses to add such groups to their priority list, he said. "They would make those decisions if they have that flexibility and ... additional supply."

Cuomo said some localities have already prioritized a large percentage of their vaccination schedule for policemen, firemen and teachers.

"There is no one-size-fits-all here," he said.

Most local governments were expected to get a 20 percent increase in vaccine supply within the next three weeks. Separately, federal allocations to pharmacies were expected to increase by around 10 percent, Cuomo added.

The state has administered 2 million coronavirus vaccines since the program began on December 15, with the vast majority of recipients getting the first of two compulsory shots.

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US to Allocate \$1.3Bln for Puerto Rico to Combat Climate-Related Disasters - White House

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will provide \$1.3 billion to Puerto Rico to address future climate-related disasters, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"The administration is releasing \$1.3 billion in aid allocated by Congress to Puerto Rico that can be deployed to protect against future disasters in partnership with the Puerto Rico Department of Housing," Psaki said. "The administration is also working to remove onerous restrictions put in place by the last administration in nearly \$500 billion in additional funds."

In January, the White House said in a statement that the Trump administration has awarded Puerto Rico \$3.7 billion to rebuild its infrastructure that was damaged by Hurricane Maria in 2017.

The Trump administration announced in September that it awarded Puerto Rico \$13 billion to help rebuild the territory's electrical grid and to support its education system following the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

An independent study conducted by the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health concluded that Hurricane Maria caused the deaths of 2,975 people in Puerto Rico between September 2017 and February 2018.

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US Navy Couple Faces Charges Over Data Theft From Personal Files - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - A husband and wife team of US Navy hackers who stole and sold personal data from a database used to conduct background checks faces charges of conspiracy and identity theft that could result in more than two decades in prison, the Justice Department said on Tuesday.

The theft took place shortly before sailor Marquis Hooper left the Navy in 2018, when Hooper and his wife, Navy Reservist Natasha Chalk gained unauthorized access to a data base used by the government and businesses to conduct background checks, Justice said in a press release.

"Hooper and Chalk searched for tens of thousands of individuals on the database and sold the information they obtained on those individuals to third parties in exchange for bitcoin. The third parties used the information to commit identity theft," Justice said.

If convicted, Hooper and Chalk face a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison on conspiracy and wire fraud charges, plus the addition of a mandatory two-years in prison for aggravated identity theft, Justice said.

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US Review of Russian Actions Including on Navalny Still Underway - White House

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Washington's review of Russian actions, including on opposition figure Alexey Navalny, which announced last month is still ongoing, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"There is an ongoing review... concerning actions I should say by the Russian government which includes the treatment of Alexey Navalny," Psaki said. "When they conclude that, that will launch... [a] process to determine what steps we will take from here."

Earlier in the day, a court in Moscow sentenced Navalny to 3.5 years behind bars in a financial misdemeanor case. The ruling came to replace Navalny's suspended sentence in the same case due to his breach of conditions set in the court's original verdict.

Navalny's legal team has 10 days to appeal the ruling.

In 2014, Alexey Navalny and his brother Oleg were indicted on charges of embezzlement in dealings with the Russian subsidiary of French cosmetics company Yves Rocher. Alexey got a 3.5-year suspended sentence, with one of the conditions being that he check in with the police in person at least twice a month.

In 2019, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that Navalny's house arrest during the Yves Rocher case trial breached several provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights but declined to recognize the case as politically-motivated.

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White House Says Biden Needs Time to Fix Immigration System, Warns Against Coming to US

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden needs time to fix the damages done to US immigration policy by the Trump administration including reuniting children in detention centers with their parents, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"We are trying to repair the damage, and the horrific actions of the prior administration by trying to do everything we can to reunite these kids with their families," Psaki said. "But it remains a dangerous trip. It remains a [question of] time. It is not the time to come to the United States."

We need to take the time to put in place an immigration process, so people can be treated humanely."

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Trump Lawyers Deny Impeachment Charges, Seeks Senate Dismissal as Unconstitutional

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Lawyers representing former President Donald Trump flatly denied insurrection charges that form the basis of his upcoming impeachment trial in the US Senate and claimed in a filing on Tuesday that the trial itself is unconstitutional because Trump is no longer in office.

"Donald John Trump, 45th President of the United States respectfully requests the Honorable Members of the Senate of the United States to dismiss Article I: Incitement of Insurrection as moot, and thus in violation of the Constitution, because the Senate lacks jurisdiction to remove from office a man who does not hold office," lawyers said in a 14-page filing to the Senate. The Senate trial of Trump on House impeachment charges begins on Monday, featuring nine US House Democrats named as impeachment managers.

Trump's lawyers signaled in the filing that they plan to raise the former president's repeated charges of massive election fraud, claiming that Trump "exercised his First Amendment right under the Constitution to express his belief that the election results were suspect."

"Insufficient evidence exists upon which a reasonable jurist could conclude that the 45th President's statements were accurate or not, and he therefore denies they were false," the lawyers said.

Within the past week, Trump reportedly hired a new defense team that was willing to press his claims during the trial that he had been cheated in his bid for a second term. Trump lawyers named in the document included Bruce Castor and David Schoen.

The gist of the argument, the lawyers explained, is that local politicians and judges rewrote state election laws and procedures without approval of state legislatures under the "convenient guise of Covid-19 pandemic 'safeguards.'"

Pandemic-related changes in many states involved expansion of vote-by-mail procedures to reduce election-day contagion at crowded polling places.

In many statewide races, results appeared to shift from Trump to Biden when local officials counted blocks of mailed ballots, which tended to favor Democrats.

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Trudeau Signs Deal for First Made-in-Canada COVID-19 Vaccine

TORONTO, February 2 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government signed an agreement with Novavax to produce its COVID-19 vaccine in Montreal, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday.

Should the preliminary agreement be finalized, Novavax would become the first drugmaker to produce their COVID-19 vaccine in Canada. The Novavax COVID-19 vaccine candidate has not received regulatory approval in Canada yet.

"We've signed a memorandum of understanding with Novavax to produce their COVID-19 vaccines at the new [National Research Council] Royalmount facility in Montreal," Trudeau told reporters in Ottawa.

Production will not begin at least until July, when the NRC's Royalmount facility is slated to open, and will come at the tail end of Canada's vaccination strategy. Trudeau has promised that all Canadians who wish to be immunized against the disease will be able to do so by September.

The prime minister said the Novavax vaccine will prove to be useful in dealing with possible future outbreaks or different strains.

Trudeau has previously lamented the lack of domestic vaccine production capability and expressed concern that countries which have a viable vaccine candidate available will prioritize their citizens ahead of exports abroad, a fear that has come to fruition with vaccine nationalism growing.

Canada is experiencing a vaccine shortage that worsened after producer Pfizer halted delivery to the country last week following an announcement that another producer, Moderna, will deliver 50,000 less vaccine doses this week. The Trudeau government has received the brunt of the criticism for the lackluster vaccine rollout that the opposition has condemned as a failure.

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UNGA President Skips First COVID-19 Vaccine Dose Due to Snow Storm in New York - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 2 (Sputnik) - UN General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir skipped his Tuesday appointment to receive the first shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine due to a heavy snowstorm that struck New York City the day before, Bozkir's spokesperson Brendan Varma said during a press briefing.

"The President was supposed to get the first dose of his COVID-19 vaccine to the New York State Department of Health this morning, but because of snowy conditions the Javits Center's vaccination site is closed today," Varma said on Tuesday afternoon.

Coronavirus vaccinations as well as other services in New York were canceled on Monday as the storm advanced and covered the city with almost 18 inches of snow, prompting the authorities to issue a state of emergency declaration.

Varma said that Bozkir's appointment was rescheduled and he will be vaccinated on Sunday.

Last week, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres received the first dose of the Moderna vaccine. Guterres was vaccinated at Adlai E. Stevenson High School in the Bronx.

Both Guterres, 71, and Bozkir, 70, became eligible to receive the vaccine based on their age. New York City currently vaccinates residents over the age of 65, as well as first responders, education, grocery and public transport workers.

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Senate Minority Leader Expects Biden Administration to Quickly Sanction Myanmar's Military

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell on Tuesday said he talked to President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken about the need for a response to the Myanmar coup, adding that he expects the United States to immediately impose sanctions against Myanmar's military leaders.

"I've had good conversations with POTUS [Joe Biden] and Sec[retary of State Antony] Blinken about the need for a swift and decisive response from the US and allies following the coup in Burma. Expect the Administration will quickly sanction the junta and defense democracy," McConnell said via Twitter.

Myanmar's military launched the coup on Monday morning and detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other senior members of National League for Democracy (NLD). The military announced a one-year state of emergency in the country, vowing to "take action" against alleged voter fraud during the November 8 general election, which the NLD party won. The military said it was committed to the democratic system and vowed to hold new and fair elections when the state of emergency ends.

Earlier on Tuesday, the United States assessed the events in Myanmar to have constituted a military coup, paving the way to imposing sanctions. The United States has already imposed sanctions on some of Myanmar's military leaders for role in the Rohingya humanitarian crisis. A senior State Department official said US officials have not had direct contact with any of the detained Myanmar officials. The United States is coordinating with allies and partners, including Japan and India, to address the situation.

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UN Special Envoy on Myanmar 'Strongly Condemns' Steps Taken By Country's Military

UNITED NATIONS, February 2 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener said during a closed Security Council consultations that she strongly condemns the steps taken by the country's military and called their actions shocking, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Tuesday.

"This morning, the Security Council held close consultations on Myanmar. In her briefing to Council members, the Secretary-General's Special Envoy Christina Schraner Burgener strongly condemned the recent steps taken by the military," Dujarric said. "The Special Envoy said... this turn of events was surprising and shocking. She said she'd been in contact with the military leadership as recently as one day before the takeover."

Myanmar's military launched the coup on Monday morning and detained State Counsellor Aun Sang Suu Kyi and President Win Myint and other National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders.

The military announced a one-year state of emergency and vowed to "take action" against alleged voter fraud during the November 8 general election. Suu Kyi's NLD party won the election.

Schraner Burgener called for the immediate release of the detained officials and said the emergency declaration should be revoked.

"The declaration should be repealed, the detained leaders should be released immediately, and the post-election litigation process should resume with full commitment from all sides," she said.

Schraner Burgener also said the suspension of all flights, including UN relief flights, is particularly worrying given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the implications this could have on the delivery of vaccines to Myanmar.

All actors must refrain from violence and the UN Security Council must send a "clear signal" warning against a "full backsliding" since Myanmar's opening in 2011, she added.

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US to Coordinate With Allies to Hold Russia Accountable for Navalny Sentencing - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States will closely coordinate with its allies and partners on the court ruling for Russia's Alexey Navalny, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The United States is deeply concerned by Russian authorities' decision to sentence opposition figure Aleksey Navalny to two years and eight months imprisonment, replacing his suspended sentence with jail time," Blinken said some half an hour after the verdict's announcement. "Even as we work with Russia to advance US interests, we will coordinate closely with our allies and partners to hold Russia accountable for failing to uphold the rights of its citizens."

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Some US Pharmacies to Receive 1Mln Doses of COVID-19 Vaccine on February 11 - White House

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The US federal government will provide one million doses of the coronavirus vaccine to several thousand pharmacies across the United States next week, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients told reporters on Tuesday.

"Starting on February 11, the federal government will deliver vaccines directly to select pharmacies across the country," Zients said in a virtual press briefing.

Zients said about 6,500 pharmacies in the United States will receive vaccine doses during the first phase of efforts to expand access for individuals.

Over the next three weeks the federal government will provide a minimum of 10.5 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine each week, which is an increase in the supply of more than 20 percent since the Biden administration took over the COVID-19 response efforts last month, Zients added.

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US Must Avoid Relying on Russia, Venezuela for Energy - Biden Deputy Defense Chief Nominee

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Reliance on countries like Russia and Venezuela to fulfill energy needs is not good for the United States, US Deputy Defense Secretary nominee Kathleen Hicks said on Tuesday.

"It is generally bad," Hicks said during her confirmation hearing at the Senate Armed Services Committee. "The United States is interested in being independent from foreign energy resources."

Growing alternative energy sources, she added, is vital for the United States.

If confirmed, Hicks would become the first woman to hold the number 2 position at the US Defense Department.

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US Concerned About European Ports Falling in China's Hands - Naval Commander

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - China controls more than a dozen of sea ports in Europe and puts in question the availability of their facilities for NATO fleets, US Naval Forces Europe Commander Adm. Robert Burke said during an online event hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the US Naval Institute on Tuesday.

"We are seeing China increasingly present in the Mediterranean both with warships as well as with their investments into ports and infrastructure," Burke said. "Today the Chinese have a controlling interest in 12 European ports... If NATO has to defend Europe - they allow us into those ports to refuel, resupply, do repairs, re-arm - we don't know if we will be able to count on that."

Burke noted that China has purchased Piraeus, the Greek port that is a home of a US destroyer squadron, and are working to buy a port in Croatia that does "maintenance and modernization work on US warships." Burke described the situation as "a trouble in pattern."

"Our European partners are increasingly aware and awaken to this potential threat," Burke said. China also tries to expand its economic influence in the Arctic and said the United States sees indications "of them ultimately positioning themselves to expand their military influence as well," Burke added.

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US to Review Aid, Sanctions Posture Toward Myanmar After Military Coup - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States will review its foreign aid contributions to Myanmar and its sanctions regime against the country's military leaders involved in the overthrow of the government on Monday, a senior State Department official said.

The US government on Tuesday assessed the events in Myanmar as having constituted a military coup.

"This assessment triggers certain restrictions in foreign assistance to the government of [Myanmar]... and in addition we will undertake a broader review of our assistance program to ensure they align with recent events," the State Department official told reporters. "We're going to start the review immediately."

The official also said that the United States will similarly conduct a review of its sanctions posture with respect to Myanmar's military leaders. Some of Myanmar's top military chiefs are already under US sanctions for their role in the Rohingya humanitarian crisis.

According to a second official, the State Department had requested \$108.65 million from the US Congress for assistance in Myanmar, although officials stress that most of the funding flows into the country through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and very little funding goes directly to the government.

US officials have not had direct contact with any of the detained Myanmar officials, the State Department official added, albeit noting that Washington is coordinating with allies and partners, including Japan and India, who are said to enjoy cordial relations with the Southeast Asian nation.

The US officials on the call reiterated Washington's calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Myanmar officials, including State Counsellor Aun Sang Suu Kyi and President Win Myint.

Myanmar's military launched the coup on Monday morning placing Suu Kyi, Myint and other National League for Democracy (NLD) members in jail. The military announced a one-year state of emergency in the country, vowing to "take action" against alleged voter fraud during the November 8 general election, which saw Suu Kyi's NLD party win resoundingly. The military

said it was committed to the democratic system and vowed to hold new and fair elections after the state of emergency ends.

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Impeachment Trial Seeks Lifetime Ban for Trump Holding Public Office - House Prosecutors

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Nine US House Democrats who will serve as prosecutors in the upcoming Senate impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump spelled out their primary goal in a "Trial Memorandum" on Tuesday to be a lifetime ban on Trump holding public office.

"President Trump's incitement of insurrection requires his conviction and disqualification from future federal officeholding," the 80-page memorandum said.

US House Democrats, with support from ten Republicans, impeached Trump for the second time of his presidency on a 232-197 vote following a January 6 riot by a group of Trump supporters on Capitol Hill.

"Trump is singularly responsible for the violence and destruction that unfolded in our seat of government on January 6," the memorandum said.

House Articles of Impeachment accuse Trump of inciting insurrection. Opening arguments in the Senate Trial begin Monday February 8, and a two-thirds majority is required for a guilty verdict. Because Trump is no longer in office, he can not be removed with a guilty verdict as specified in the US Constitution.

But nine House Democrats led by Congressman Jamie Raskin, in the 80-page trial memorandum, cited a separate provision in the Constitution barring people from public service if they swear allegiance to the Constitution and later engage in or give support to acts of insurrection.

"President Trump's incitement of insurrection requires his conviction and disqualification from future federal officeholding," the impeachment memo said.

Critics point out that Trump called on his supporters to let their voices be heard "peacefully and patriotically" and that the entire impeachment process is unconstitutional because Trump can not be removed from an office he no longer holds - the gist of a resolution proposed by Senator Rand Paul that the Senate blocked on a 55-45 vote last week.

The tally falls short of the 67 votes that would be needed to convict Trump.

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US Admiral Says Russia May Be Preparing to Deploy Nuclear Weapons in Crimea

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - US Naval Forces Europe Commander Adm. Robert Burke on Tuesday accused Russia of weaponizing the entire area of the Crimean peninsula and alleged that Moscow may be preparing to deploy nuclear arms there.

"The Black Sea is another one where we see an increasingly aggressive Russia. Since the illegal annexation of Crimea, they have weaponized this entire area and recent news are that Russia may be preparing to deploy nuclear weapons to occupied Crimea," Burke said during an online event hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the US Naval Institute.

Crimea, a Russian enclave, was transferred to Ukraine in 1954 by the then-Soviet Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev. In 2014, 96 percent of the residents of Crimea voted in a referendum in favor of rejoining Russia.

Ukraine and the majority of Western countries have refused to recognize the results of the referendum. Russia has insisted that the referendum was conducted in full compliance with international law and that it expressed in the highest democratic forum the will of the Crimean people to become part of Russia again.

Burke said that both US and NATO fleets operate in the Black Sea "as often as we can."

"To the extent we can we are present there... On average about 120 days per year for US warships and about 240 if you count allies and US together," Burke said.

The deployment of warships in the Black Sea seeks to ensure "peace through presence," Burke added.

The United States and its allies have accused Russia of militarizing Crimea in the past as well and raised the issue at the United Nations in December 2019. The Crimean parliament responded by proposing a UN mission to visit Crimea to stop the spread of misinformation. Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov said then Crimea is Russia's sovereign territory and Moscow can do whatever it needs to ensure its security within the boundaries set by international law.

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FBI Confirms 2 Agents Killed, 3 Wounded While Serving Warrant in Florida - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The FBI confirmed on Tuesday that two of its agents were killed and three others sustained injuries in a shooting while they were serving a search warrant in Florida.

"Two FBI agents are deceased and three are wounded. Two wounded agents were transported to hospital and are in stable condition," the agency said in a statement. "The names of the deceased will not be released at this time."

The FBI also said in the statement that the suspected shooter is deceased.

The FBI explained that the shooting took place at approximately 6:00 a.m. in Sunrise, Florida, when a team of agents were trying to execute "a federal court-ordered search warrant in furtherance of a violent crimes against children case."

The shooting incident is being investigated by the FBI's Inspection Division, the statement said.

The warrant was related to a child pornography case under investigation by the FBI, local media reported.

The media reported earlier that the suspect was believed to have barricaded and killed himself.

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UN Human Rights Experts Urge Sudan to Enhance Civilian Protection in Darfur - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, February 2 (Sputnik) - Sudan should immediately implement measures to ensure the safety of civilians and bring to justice the perpetrators of recent inter-communal

violence in the Darfur region, UN experts from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a statement on Tuesday.

"We urge the government of Sudan to step up its efforts to protect civilians, including those internally displaced, prevent further displacements," the experts said. "Justice, accountability and reparation to victims are essential to address insecurity, prevent further violence and displacement."

Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions Agnes Callamard and Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons Cecilia Jimenez-Damary also expressed concern about the fate of the more than 50,000 people who have recently been displaced by violence in Darfour.

"Many have been living in protracted displacement in dire conditions, and the challenges they face to achieve durable solutions, in particular, due to insecurity and land disputes, are disturbing," the experts said.

On January 16-18, at least 235 people were killed and more injured in two separate incidents of inter-communal clashes in West and South Darfur.

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

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At Least 2 FBI Agents Die in Gunfire While Serving Warrant in Florida - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - At least two FBI agents have been killed and others wounded after coming under gunfire while serving a search warrant in the US State Florida, local media reported on Tuesday.

The warrant was related to a child pornography case under investigation that the FBI was investigating, the South Florida Sun Sentinel reported.

The news outlet also reported that the suspected gunman is believed to be dead after barricading and then

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UN Report Claims Forced Labor, Torture Continue in North Korea's Prison System

UNITED NATIONS, February 2 (Sputnik) - The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said in a new report on Tuesday that reasonable ground exists to conclude torture and forced labor continue to take place in North Korea's prisons and may amount to crimes against humanity.

In 2014, the UN commission of inquiry on human rights in North Korea concluded that crimes against humanity of gravity and scale that did not have any parallel in the world were committed in North Korea. Seven years later, interviews with people who escaped North Korea provide

"reasonable grounds" to believe that the systematic infliction of severe physical and mental pain in the country's prison system continues, OHCHR said.

"Beatings, stress positions, psychological abuse, forced labor, denial of medical care and sanitation and hygiene products, and starvation all combine to create an atmosphere of severe mental and physical suffering in detention," the report said. "Those acts may amount to the crime against humanity of torture, if found by a competent court to have taken place."

The report stated that the government is engaged in a systematic attack against people considered a threat to North Korea's political system, including people who practice religion, introduce "subversive" influences, such as foreign films and music, or leave the country. Additionally, members of the population are systematically imprisoned without due process and undergo harsh treatment for exercising basic human rights, the report said.

It suggested that in order to establish lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, such abuses must end and the rights of victims to justice must be fulfilled, with proper investigation and prosecution of the alleged international crimes.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet urged the international community to undertake efforts and bring justice to the victims of human rights abuses in North Korea.

"I urge the international community to prioritize justice and to take immediate steps to prevent further infliction of serious human rights violations against the people of the DPRK [North Korea]," Bachelet said in a statement.

The report also called on North Korea's government to grant international aid organizations and human rights monitors immediate access to the country and all detention facilities.

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Senior US House Republican Demands Americans Get COVID-19 Shots Before Illegal Immigrants

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - Plans by President Joe Biden to make COVID-19 shots available to illegal aliens represents a rebuke for US citizens and legal residents who will be forced to wait longer for vaccinations, House Republican Whip Steve Scalise said on Tuesday.

"President [Joe] Biden's plan to vaccinate illegal immigrants ahead of Americans who are currently being denied the COVID-19 vaccine is a slap in the face to millions of hard-working families who have been waiting months for the vaccine and expect Washington leaders to be looking out for them," Scalise said in a statement.

Scalise urged Biden to focus on vaccinating elderly Americans and frontline workers first.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that no immigration enforcement operations would take place at vaccination sites to ensure that all people have access to COVID-19 shots regardless of immigration status.

The DHS announcement less than two weeks after Biden was sworn in, not only encouraged illegal immigrants to get the coronavirus shot, it also marked the first time the US government commented on immigration enforcement at vaccine sites.

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US Should Speed Up Military Modernization to Deter China - Deputy Defense Chief Nominee

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - The United States should speed up its military modernization in order to avoid conflict with and deter China, President Joe Biden's nominee for Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hick said on Tuesday.

"Armed conflict between the United States and China is not desirable, and it is not inevitable. The US military plays a critical role in preventing that outcome," Hicks said during her nomination hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Hicks pointed out that China continues to modernize its military and while the United States stands ready militarily, it should modernize as well.

"Even as we stand ready today, we must modernize our concepts, capabilities, workforce, and budget for deterrence to endure," Hicks said.

The Defense Department and Congress should cooperate in the process of modernization and pursue partnerships with industry, research institutions, civilian departments and agencies toward that end, Hicks added.

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US Air Force Soldiers Deploy to Norway Ahead of Bomber Task Force Missions - EUCOM

WASHINGTON, February 2 (Sputnik) - More than 200 United States Air Force soldiers have deployed to Norway ahead of the first-ever strategic bomber exercises in the country in the coming weeks, US European Command (EUCOM) said on Tuesday.

"For the first time in Norway, more than 200 US Air Force personnel from Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, with an expeditionary B-1 Lancer bomber squadron, will arrive to support upcoming Bomber Task Force missions out of Orland Air Base, Norway," the release said. "The Airman will be a part of the advance team for scheduled missions in the coming weeks which will occur for a limited time."

EUCOM did not disclose the details of the planned missions, but said the training would include operating in the high north, and drills to improve interoperability with allies in the European theater.

As a precaution amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the soldiers underwent medical screening prior to their departure from Texas, and will restrict their movements for a 10-day quarantine period after arriving in Norway, EUCOM said.

The US Air Force has stepped up its strategic bomber missions in the Arctic in recent months, as part of its broader Pentagon strategy of countering Russia and China in the region.

Russia has criticized the ongoing militarization of Norway and by NATO allies, saying such activities increase tensions in Europe and pose a threat to peace in the Arctic region.

