

02/03/21 Wednesday

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UAE and Israeli Soccer Clubs to Play First Friendly Matches Following Normalization
by [Mary F.](#)

The UAE and Israel signed a normalization agreement on August 13, 2020, officially referred to as the Abraham Accords. As a result, the UAE became the third Arab country after Egypt in 1997 and Jordan in 1994 to formally normalize its relationship with Israel.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) soccer club Al-Ain will play Israel's Maccabi Haifa in two friendly matches in the near future, according to a report by the Times of Israel.

The first match will be hosted by Al-Ain while the second will be held in Haifa. The dates for the matches have yet to be made public.

The announcement comes after the UAE's landmark move to normalize relations with Israel in August.

"[The agreement] will consolidate the policy of bridge-building and cooperation between the two major clubs in various fields including marketing, technical cooperation, investment, commercial activities, media and sport," said Mohamed Thaalob, chairman of the Al-Ain club investment company, [the Times of Israel reported](#).

"I am pleased to witness this important moment in the history of the Israeli and Emirati game, and for sport in general," Yaqoub Shahar, president of Maccabi Haifa Club, also said in a statement to the outlet.

In December 2020, the UAE Football Association signed a memorandum of understanding with the Israeli Football Association in Dubai to establish closer sporting ties.

The agreement was signed in the presence of FIFA president Gianni Infantino, [the National News reported at the time](#).

In September 2020, Diaa Saba also became the first Israeli to play in the UAE after joining Al-Nasr, the professional association football club located in Al Nasr, Dubai.

The UAE is not the only Arab country to normalize diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. Relations between Bahrain and Israel were also normalized in September 2020. In December 2020, Morocco also normalized ties with Israel while Bahrain normalized relations with the Jewish state on October 23, 2020.

The recent diplomatic pacts between Israel and Arab nations are the first since Jordan recognized Israel in 1994 and Egypt in 1997.

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Iran's Foreign Minister Applauds Iraq's Arrest Warrant for Trump Over Soleimani Killing
by [Mary F.](#)

Tensions between the US and Iran has been high since the US assassinated top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, in Iraq on January 3, 2020.

In a recent statement, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif commended an Iraqi court's decision to order the arrest of former US president Donald Trump for the assassination of top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an Iraqi leader and commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee, who was also assassinated on January 3, 2020, by the US.

"Putting an end to the presence of US forces in the region would be the best response to this terrorist act," Zarif is quoted as saying during a Wednesday meeting with Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs Fuad Hussein in Tehran, [PressTV reported](#).

Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), also applauded the arrest order issued by the Iraqi court for Trump on Wednesday.

"We must not allow the blood of the martyrs Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Qassem Soleimani to go in vain, and organizers as well as perpetrators of this terrorist crime must be prosecuted and severely punished," Ali Shamkhani said in a meeting with the Iraqi foreign minister in Tehran.

The arrest warrant against Trump was issued by a judge in Baghdad's investigative court on January 7, AP News reported at the time.

Under the Iraqi penal code, those who commit premeditated murder may face the death penalty. According to the Supreme Judicial Council, the decision to issue the warrant was made "after the judge recorded the statements of the claimants from the family of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis," [AP reported](#).

Relations between Israel and Iran have also been particularly poor after top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was killed, reportedly by a remote-controlled machine gun, east of Tehran on November 27, 2020.

According to Iran's Supreme National Security Agency, Israeli spy agency Mossad and the People's Mujahedin Organization, an Iranian political-militant organization, were involved in Fakhrizadeh's killing. Israel, however, has not claimed responsibility for Fakhrizadeh's death.

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Scottish Lawmakers Decline Call to Investigate Finances of Trump's Golf Courses
by [Mary F.](#)

Former US president Donald Trump owns 15 golf courses across the US, Scotland and Ireland. A September investigation into Trump's tax returns found that Trump has lost around \$315 million since 2000 from the 14 golf courses he owns.

Scottish lawmakers have called on the government to launch an investigation into Trump and the Trump Organization to determine how he received the funds to buy two golf courses in Scotland, [the Washington Post reported Wednesday](#).

Trump has reportedly invested more than \$289 million into the two golf courses in the country without ever turning a profit.

Scottish lawmakers called for an “unexplained wealth order” to determine where Trump got the money to buy the golf courses. If the Trump Organization is unable to prove that the money used to buy the courses is clean, the Scottish government could in turn confiscate the properties.

However, Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has said that investigations regarding Trump’s finances would be left to the police.

On Wednesday, Scotland's Parliament agreed with Sturgeon, rejecting a nonbinding measure that called on Sturgeon to launch an investigation into Trump’s finances.

However, the leader of Scotland's Green Party, Patrick Harvie, criticized the Parliament’s decision, having called for a governmental investigation “to protect Scotland's good name from association with the toxic Trump brand.”

"Unfortunately, today's debate confirmed the Scottish Government remains unwilling to investigation Trump's golf courses," Harvie said in statement following the vote, [CBS News reported](#). "Scotland cannot be a country where anyone with money can buy whatever land and property they want, no questions asked."

In a recent statement, Trump’s son, Eric, censured politicians for launching such an investigation.

“At a critical time when politicians should be focused on saving lives and reopening businesses in Scotland, they are focused on advancing their personal agendas," Eric Trump, executive vice president of the Trump Organization, [said in a statement obtained by the Hill](#).

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General Motors to Shutter Three Plants, Halve Production at Fourth Amid Semiconductor Shortage
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US sanctions on China’s largest semiconductor manufacturer could be hurting US companies especially badly amid a global shortage of electronic chips.

General Motors announced on Tuesday it was joining the list of automotive companies that were temporarily slashing production amid a global shortage in semiconductors.

According to a Tuesday [report by Reuters](#), General Motors will shut down its factories in Fairfax, Kansas; Ingersoll, Ontario; and San Luis Potosi, Mexico, for a week beginning on February 8. That same week, its Bupyeong 2 plant in South Korea will operate at half-capacity.

“Despite our mitigation efforts, the semiconductor shortage will impact GM production in 2021,” GM spokesman David Barnas told Reuters. “Semiconductor supply for the global auto industry remains very fluid. Our supply chain organization is working closely with our supply base to find solutions for our suppliers’ semiconductor requirements and to mitigate impacts on GM.”

Barnas didn’t say how much production would be lost, but indicated the company would keep the factory lines producing its highest-selling automobiles, including full-size pickup trucks, SUVs, and the Chevrolet Corvette sports car.

Citing data from IHS Markit, [Automotive News reported](#) Tuesday that the chip shortage would reduce global automobile production by 672,000 vehicles in the first quarter of 2021; data from AutoForecast Solutions indicated the shortage had already resulted in 564,000 less vehicles being made and could reduce production in 2021 by a further 964,000.

GM is just the latest automaker to face cutbacks due to the shortage. [Last week, Ford](#) said it would temporarily eliminate two of three shifts at its Chicago factory and was extending a plant closure in Louisville, Kentucky, for another week.

Other companies that have reduced production include Toyota, Volkswagen, Honda, Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Subaru, Nissan, Stellantis, and PSA Group, among others.

According to the [New York Times](#), the shortage has been created by a global spike in demand for home electronics as millions of people began working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, buying computers, tablets, and other devices that require similar semiconductor chips to those used in the computers that govern car functions.

The foundries that make semiconductor chips, most of which are based in mainland China and Taiwan, have been rushing to increase production. However, US companies face an especially dire situation [thanks to sanctions](#) the Trump administration placed on China's largest semiconductor foundry, the Shanghai-based Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC).

US firms wishing to buy from the partially-state-owned Chinese company must first obtain a special license from the US Department of Commerce. The administration of former US President Donald Trump blacklisted SMIC and several other firms after claiming that doing business with them benefited the People's Liberation Army, although SMIC has [denied any connection](#) to the Chinese military. The firm's many customers include Qualcomm, Broadcom, and Texas Instruments.

The irony of the situation is that Trump [credited his trade war](#) with China for having reinvigorated the US automobile industry.

Michael Hogan, a senior vice president at California-based chipmaker GlobalFoundries, told the Times in mid-January that clearing up the shortage could take another six months, adding that "We are doing everything humanly possible to prioritize our output for automotive."

Electronics manufacturer [Sony also announced](#) on Tuesday that the semiconductor shortage would prevent it from ramping up production of the Playstation 5, its newest gaming console.

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GOP Lawmakers Threaten to Boot Omar From House Committees if Dems Attempt to Oust by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The freshman representative from Georgia has aroused no shortage of anger since her November 2020 election, including for her support of conspiracy theories ranging from Qanon to claiming the September 11 attacks and Sandy Hook school shooting were faked.

Republican lawmakers in the US House of Representatives are threatening to remove Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) from her committee assignments if Democrats proceed with their own push to remove Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA).

[Fox News first](#) reported the story on Wednesday, noting that the proposed Republican amendment would cite past accusations of anti-Semitism leveled against Omar for her criticisms of Israel and the Israeli lobby in the United States. Reps. Brian Babin (R-TX), Jeff Duncan (R-SC), Jody Hice (R-GA), Andy Biggs (R-AZ), and Ronny Jackson (R-TX) are the reported sponsors of the initiative.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD), who leads the Democrats in the lower chamber, announced that a floor vote could be held on removing Greene from her positions on the Education and Budget committees as soon as Thursday.

The GOP's House chief, Rep. Kevin McCarthy, previously said he would have a talk with Greene on Tuesday about some of her controversial actions, which include calling for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) to be executed and [harassing fellow freshman](#) lawmaker Rep. Cori Bush (D-MO). She is also a proponent of the Qanon conspiracy theory and vocally backed the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol by supporters of former US President Donald Trump, which aimed to overturn the results of the November 2020 presidential election. A meeting by the House Republican Steering Committee Tuesday night about Greene failed to reach a decision on responding to Greene, with one lawmaker [telling The Hill](#) the group would likely meet again on Wednesday night.

A separate initiative by Bush seeks to remove Greene from Congress entirely, along with all lawmakers who supported the January 6 putsch. Next week, Trump's trial for allegedly inciting the attack begins in the Senate.

Omar has long been a [target for conservatives](#), with Trump [once accusing](#) the Somali Muslim refugee of supporting al-Qaeda*.

In early 2019, she [aroused particular anger](#) after quoting the 1997 Puff Daddy song "[All About the Benjamins](#)" in relation to an attempt by McCarthy to punish her and Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), the only other Muslim in Congress, for accusing Israel of oppressing Palestinian people. Omar later clarified she was specifically referencing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which in fact bills itself as "America's Pro-Israel Lobby."

Detractors claimed it was anti-Semitic and Trump called for her to be removed from her position on the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. Omar eventually apologized for her wording, but not for the substance of her tweet, and the House subsequently [passed a resolution](#) denouncing all forms of hate, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

*al-Qaeda is a terrorist group outlawed in Russian and many other states

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Cuba to Offer COVID-19 Vaccine to Arriving Tourists as Island Aims for Total Inoculation in 2021

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Cuban doctors have been hailed across Africa and Latin America for providing the “backbone” of numerous nations’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the US government has attacked the medical brigades, claiming they are engaging in human trafficking, and has encouraged nations such as Brazil and Bolivia to expel them.

Tourists arriving in Cuba will be offered the chance to be vaccinated against COVID-19 if they so choose, a leading Cuban doctor recently said. The country is developing four vaccines for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, and has plans to rapidly vaccinate the entire population.

“Would you travel to Cuba to get vaccinated?” asks a recent video produced by TeleSUR. In the video, Vicente Vérez, the director of Havana’s Finlay Institute medical research center, says the country intends to [produce 100 million](#) doses of the Soberana 02 vaccine this year and to vaccinate the entire Cuban population of 11.3 million people. The country will also offer the vaccine to Iran, Venezuela, Vietnam, and India.

“Tourists will be given the option, if they want, to be vaccinated in Cuba as well,” Vérez says. Either way, visitors to the island nation will be [required to quarantine](#) for several days at their own expense upon arrival, until they get negative results from a PCR test, according to Dr. Francisco Duran, head of Epidemiology at the Cuban Ministry of Public Health. Similar measures were used last spring to successfully contain the virus. The move comes as COVID-19 cases are sharply rising in Cuba for the first time since the spring, including from the new South African strain.

Meanwhile, 90 miles north in the US state of Florida, “vaccine tourism” has become a subject of ire as vaccine [supplies run short](#) and daily new COVID-19 cases and deaths remain high.

“We’re discouraging people to come to Florida just to get a vaccine,” Florida Governor Ron DeSantis said at a press conference last month, according to [the Miami Herald](#). “If they have a residence and they’re not just kind of flying by night for a week or two, I’m totally fine with that. [Snowbirds] are much different than someone just showing up and saying give me a shot and then they’re going to fly back somewhere; we’re obviously not going to do that.”

Soberana 02 isn’t the only vaccine Cuba is producing: three others are in various stages of testing, including the Abdala vaccine, which began Phase 2 trials on Monday, [according to TeleSUR](#). The other two vaccines are Soberana 01 and Mambisa, the latter of which has an unusual form of delivery, via nasal spray.

Pioneering Medicine Under Siege

Cuba’s development of not one but four COVID-19 vaccines is remarkable, considering the [increased pressure](#) put on the socialist nation by the United States over the last year, including being placed on the US State Department’s list of [state sponsors of terrorism](#) last month. It has been under embargo by the US since 1960.

The sanctions have put a major dent in Cuban tourism, a mainstay of the country’s economy since the collapse of the Soviet Union 30 years ago. Even before the pandemic hit, Cuba registered a [9.3% drop in tourism](#) in 2019, as the Trump administration reimposed travel restrictions that were relaxed late in Barack Obama’s presidential term.

Cuba has one of the highest ratios of doctors per capita on the planet and Cuban doctors have played a major role in the Third World in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, providing medical expertise in more than 40 countries. Ralph Gonsalves, prime minister of Saint Vincent and the

Grenadines, and chairman of the Caribbean bloc CARICOM, [told Reuters that](#) in many Caribbean countries, Cuban doctors comprise “the backbone of the response to the pandemic.” In 2019, nearly every member state at the United Nations [voted to condemn](#) the blockade for its “incalculable humanitarian damages” and calling it “a flagrant, massive and systematic violation of human rights” and noting it “qualifies as an act of genocide under Articles II (b) and (c) of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.”

The only nations to vote against the resolution were the US and Brazil, while US allies Colombia and Ukraine abstained.

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YouTube Blasted for Demonetizing News2Share Video Journalism Page Over Capitol Insurrection Footage
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In the aftermath of the January 6 assault on the US Capitol that killed five people, YouTube and other social media giants have waged a widespread campaign to prune supportive content from their sites. Caught in the middle have been independent reporters who sought to provide nonpartisan coverage of the event.

On Wednesday, News2Share editor-in-chief Ford Fischer announced that video hosting site YouTube had demonetized the news outlet’s entire YouTube channel. The video journalist has been engaged in on-and-off fights with YouTube for years over his filming of controversial topics.

“After me spending the last week criticizing @TeamYouTube’s takedown of my raw footage from January 6, they have just demonetized my ENTIRE CHANNEL,” Fischer tweeted on Wednesday, noting that the site accused him of producing “content that focuses on controversial issues and that is harmful to viewers.”

Founded in 2014, [News2Share’s nearly](#) 1,600 videos on YouTube have been collectively viewed by some 25.4 million people and the channel has 52,000 subscribers.

Some of the material can be shocking and include controversial topics, since the outlet covers protests, rallies, and press conferences by figures and groups from across the political spectrum, from the Proud Boys to Antifa, and posts its video footage from events without edits.

“Automated video takedowns, demonetization, and incorrect markings of content and profiles as ‘inappropriate’ has plagued the social media sites I use, seemingly administered for the most part by algorithms making decisions, or humans with no oversight or accessibility to the user,” Fischer said in a statement obtained by Sputnik.

“Unfortunately, I’ve found that the drastic step of public advocacy is the only method that seems to work. I am not an activist, but if years of covering activism has taught me anything, it’s that nothing is more powerful than using one’s voice to hold unaccountable institutions accountable. For now, it is my intention to make the public aware of what happened, and how it can affect them. I will do this until YouTube realizes and fixes its mistakes,” he added.

Progressive political analyst Jamarl Thomas, who also co-hosts Fault Lines on Radio Sputnik, said on Wednesday that [his channel](#), with more than 9 million views and some 30,000 subscribers, had suffered an identical fate to Fischer's.

"You guys have destroyed my channel without legit explanation as to why," Thomas tweeted at several of YouTube's Twitter accounts. "No videos are given - and frankly there is literally zero 'harmful' content on my channel. This is a radically bad error that needs to be corrected ... Nothing on my channel even comes [close] to the guidelines on 'harm' and I honestly resent the defamation."

Crackdown on 'Harmful' Content

For independent content creators with [small budgets, monetization](#) of their content can provide a vital source of income, as each view adds to a check YouTube cuts for its partners. However, the clumsy and seemingly arbitrary way in which the Google-owned company goes about removing either a video's monetization or the video entirely has led to some awkward interactions via social media and prolonged campaigns to redress grievances with the process. In the absence of his monetized channel, Fischer said he would have to rely on donations via Patreon to pay the bills, which include travel costs to record the outlet's content.

On Monday, Fischer called attention to YouTube's removal of one video shot on January 6: a continuous reel of the crowd outside the White House during then-US President Donald Trump's speech. The event took place prior to the insurrection at the Capitol. In response, YouTube's "Team YouTube" [Twitter account replied](#) that his video was removed because it "didn't include countervailing views or sufficient context of the claims made in the footage. As videos can be embedded across the web, we only allow this content to remain on the platform if there's appropriate context within the video itself."

[Fischer retorted that](#) it was actually his video that sported greater context because it did more than simply show footage of Trump speaking at a vaguely-named "save America rally." YouTube's actions come amid a [widespread crackdown](#) by tech giants on far-right content, including QAnon and other conspiracy theories promulgated by [groups who participated](#) in the January 6 assault on the US Capitol. The takedown began with Twitter's censure and subsequent removal of [Trump's personal account](#) but soon extended to accounts pushing the narrative that Trump had actually won the November 3, 2020, election, and that US President Joe Biden had "stolen" the victory from him.

However, it also falls within a larger initiative by the tech giants to [regulate harmful content](#) on their sites after several mass shooting events in which the shooters livestreamed the massacres online. It has been extended to include fighting "disinformation" by including links to information about various topics, including COVID-19 and mail-in ballots, and the flagging of accounts ostensibly linked to [state-affiliated media outlets](#) with content notices.

Another thread in this cable of censorship has been the [Russiagate scandal](#), in which Democrats and sections of the US national security state opposed to Trump attempted to blame his unexpected 2016 election victory - and every [inconvenient political event](#) thereafter - on alleged Russian interference.

Corporate Media Gets Special Pass

In his response to YouTube above, Fischer included several screenshots of other networks' similar videos, including from CBS-affiliate networks WBNS 10 and KCTV 5, that had not been removed but which showed essentially the same content as his.

[Speaking with Sputnik](#) during a prior fight against demonetization of specific videos on News2Share in October 2019, Fischer noted that corporate news sites like ABC and the Atlantic have featured the same content he has on their own YouTube channels without reproach by the Google subsidiary.

“The actual channel, to people who aren’t familiar, is entirely just raw footage of news situations,” he told Radio Sputnik’s Fault Lines in 2019 about his outlet. “So the channel itself has no ideology, let alone hateful ideology, but in some cases it’s documenting either people who are protesting against things that are hateful or video that would be of individuals who would be considered hateful. But of course again, CNN wouldn’t be punished for reporting on white nationalists, for example.”

[Sputnik reported](#) at the time how analyst YouTube Analyzed and YouTube channel Nerd City proved that YouTube ran an automatic demonetization algorithm based on an exhaustive list of keywords detected in video descriptions. However, those rules did not seem to be applied to corporate media outlets. The list included a number of commonly covered topics in the media, including Palestine, Osama bin Laden, Syria, Ukraine, trans and gay, which would automatically exclude videos that cover protests or other events involving those issues from generating income based on views.

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Photos: US Man Has ‘New Chance at Life’ After Receiving First Successful Face, Hands Transplant

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Medical specialists previously conducted simultaneous face and double hand transplants on two occasions; however, both operations ultimately failed after one recipient died from complications and another patient was forced to have the transplanted hands removed after they failed to function.

Doctors at New York University’s Langone Health facility announced Wednesday that a team of specialists were able to perform the first successful face and double hand transplant operation, a landmark victory for the medical and transplant community.

The operation took place in early August and lasted approximately 23 hours. Overall, the procedure saw the involvement of a 16-member surgical team and an 80-member group that made up the operating room staff.

At the center of the case is 22-year-old New Jersey resident Joe DiMeo, who received third-degree burns to over 80% of his body in 2018 when he fell asleep at the wheel after working a night shift. His car hit a utility pole, flipped over and burst into flames.

After it was determined that conventional surgeries were not going to remedy DiMeo’s condition and help him regain the use of his hands or his full vision, doctors began preparing for a transplant operation; however, the odds were stacked against DiMeo early on as he only had a 6% chance in finding a donor that was compatible with his immune system.

Making the donor search even more tricky was that officials also wanted to find a donor with the same gender, skin tone and hand dominance at a time when organ donations plummeted amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the majority of doctors were reassigned to work with COVID-19 patients.

"When we talked about the possibility of doing both the hands and the face, I had to let him know that this has been attempted twice in the world and both have failed, and actually one of those patients died," lead transplant expert Dr. Eduardo Rodriguez told [People magazine](#). "He understood the risks that were involved, and he knew that this was a cutting-edge surgery that hadn't been successful in the past, but he had the greatest faith in all of us."

Warning: the image below may be disturbing to some viewers

Despite all the hurdles, DiMeo's medical team managed to locate a donor in Delaware through the help of LiveOnNY, an organ recovery organization for the greater New York metropolitan area, and Gift of Life, a regional donor program that serves southern New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. The surgery was performed two days after Rodriguez examined the unidentified donor's body.

Transplant protocols saw officials amputate both of DiMeo's hands during the operation and replace them mid-forearm with those from the donor. [A release](#) from the hospital notes that officials reconnected three dominant nerves to the hands, six blood vessels and approximately 21 tendons with hair-thin sutures.

In addition to a full face transplant, the medical team worked to resettle eyebrows, nose, eyelids, lips, both ears and underlying skull, cheek, nasal and chin bone segments.

To date, DiMeo has undergone several less extensive surgeries, but has shown no signs of rejecting the transplants. Since being discharged from the hospital in late November, DiMeo has been in intensive rehabilitation, spending hours on physical, occupational and speech therapy. DiMeo's dedication to regaining his independence has begun to pay off as he's now able to get dressed by himself, walk his dog, work out at the gym and even play a game of pool, among other feats. He told the [New York Post](#) that one of his bigger goals is to drive again, but that he isn't "trying to rush into it."

"I'm still the same guy, you know, before the surgery and after surgery," he told the outlet. "Even before the burns, I was still the same guy. Just my stages of life. I just keep rolling with the punches and keep moving on. Nothing really holds me back."

DiMeo further explained that he felt the need to go public about his operation because it was "a big step in science," and felt "pretty proud to be a part of it."

For the remainder of his life, DiMeo will have to remain on medications to ensure that his body does not reject the transplants and continue on his rehabilitation path in order to strengthen his sensation and the function of his new transplants.

DiMeo told the [Associated Press](#), "You got a new chance at life. You really can't give that up."

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Pence Opens Transition Office, Announces He Will Move Back to Indiana Later This Year
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, reports emerged that former US Vice President Mike Pence was reportedly “couch-surfing” with politicians from his home state of Indiana after parting ways with the White House and had failed to set up a temporary residence.

Pence [announced](#) the creation of his post-White House transition office on Wednesday, revealing that his operations would be based at an undisclosed address within the Washington, DC, area.

Similar to the [transition office](#) established by former US President Donald Trump, Pence’s office will “manage correspondence, scheduling requests, public statements and official activities for the former vice president and former second lady.”

“The vice president and Mrs. Pence look forward to continuing to elevate causes that are near and dear to their hearts and serving the American people when called upon,” the announcement notes.

The Wednesday release also indicates that the Pences will be taking up residence at a Northern Virginia home for the time being; however, the pair plan to move back to Indiana during the summer.

Pence has not been spotted at any public events since he attended the swearing-in ceremony at the inauguration of US President Joe Biden.

Although it’s presently unclear what “causes” the pair intend to “elevate,” [NBC News](#) recently suggested that the former vice president is weighing plans to start a fundraising committee that would maintain his ties to political donors.

The outlet reported that Pence may make an announcement on his plans in the coming weeks. The former vice president’s announcement came days after reports surfaced that he and his wife were [temporarily bunking](#) with friends and family after they left their taxpayer-funded housing at Number One Observatory Circle. One adviser told Business Insider that the pair momentarily returned to Indiana in mid-January, but noted that the Pences no longer own property in the Hoosier State.

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US Stance on ‘One China’ Policy Remains Unchanged Under Biden Presidency, State Department Says

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In no hurry to engage with China, reports indicate US President Joe Biden has yet to speak with Chinese President Xi Jinping, as administration officials continue to outline their strategy towards Beijing. Although plans are still in the early stages, the new administration appears as though it will likely uphold Trump-era tactics against China.

Ned Price, the spokesperson for the US State Department, told reporters during a Wednesday briefing that US support of the so-called “One China” policy over Taiwan has not been changed under the incoming Biden administration.

Asked if the Biden White House would be switching gears on the topic, [Price stressed](#) after a brief pause that “our policy has not changed,” noting that the current stance is guided by existing policy.

The US has adhered to the “One China” policy for decades; however, under the Trump administration, US-China relations severely deteriorated, as former US President Donald Trump accused Beijing of taking advantage of US businesses and trying to engage in intellectual property theft, among others.

Making matters even worse, the Trump administration cleared arms sales to Taiwan, which China sees as a wayward territory in need of being brought back into the mainland’s fold. The hefty defense sale to the self-governing nation included weapons systems, rocket launchers, sensors, and artillery. Beijing has previously stated that it has not ruled out the use of force in its efforts to keep Taiwan.

Price’s remarks followed those he made during a [Tuesday briefing](#) that noted the Biden administration was biding its time over concerns regarding China, opting instead to discuss matters with the US’ allies and partners first.

However, the spokesperson did acknowledge it was in the US’ “national interest to cooperate on a limited basis with China” on a variety of issues, such as climate change and trade.

“So, as a first step we want to make sure that we are in lockstep with those allies, in lockstep with those partners, and then ... you can expect that there will be engagement in several areas with China,” he said.

At the time, Price described US-China relations as one viewed “through the lens of competition and positioning ourselves to compete and ultimately to out-compete with the Chinese.” He further doubled down on stances made by the Trump administration that China is threatening US alliances, stunting the Land of the Free’s “technological edge” and engaging in “gross human rights violations that shock the conscience.”

Price’s remarks echoed those made by newly confirmed Secretary of State Antony Blinken, a notorious warhawk who [recently described](#) China as a country that “poses the most significant challenge” to the US.

For its part, China has called on the Biden administration to come to the negotiating table and remedy the “strategic misjudgment” of the previous administration’s policies. Yang Jiechi, head of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Foreign Affairs Commission, remarked during a [Tuesday forum](#) that Beijing hoped Washington would “be able to return the relationship to the course of sound and steady development.”

“I hope that the US will rise above the outdated mentality of zero-sum, major-power rivalry and work with China to keep the relationship on the right track,” Yang noted.

Although Biden has signed multiple [executive orders](#) since being sworn in, the commander-in-chief has yet to revoke any Trump-era policies against China.

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US Judge Orders Jail to Give 'QAnon Shaman' Organic Food After Rioter Goes on Hunger Strike

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Jacob Chansley, a 33-year-old resident of Arizona, is one of many infamous rioters who stormed the Capitol during the January 6 insurrection. He has been charged with multiple offenses and detained over concerns he may encourage new acts against the Biden administration.

A federal judge ordered a Washington, DC, jail on Wednesday to provide Chansley with organic food after the infamous rioter went on a weeklong hunger strike after the facility failed to adhere to his shamanic diet.

The order came down after Chansley's lawyer, Al Watkins, submitted an [emergency motion](#) that indicated his client was wasting away because organic meals were not being supplied to him by the detention facility.

During a hearing over the motion, lawyers for the District of Columbia jail explained that an initial request for organic food had been rejected because they found no evidence that an organic diet was a "tenent" of Shamanism, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch [reported](#). Officials also indicated that they had not been made aware of Chansley's dietary restrictions beforehand.

Ultimately, US District Judge Royce C. Lamberth deferred to an earlier decision that was made by an Arizona judge who allowed Chansley to be provided with his specified diet. The so-called shaman was initially taken into police custody in early January.

In the Wednesday-filed motion, Watkins noted that Chansley, otherwise known as the horn-toting "QAnon Shaman," reportedly lost more than 20 pounds in the span of several days, as he refused to consume the food that was provided by the jail.

"The defendant has not been able to consume any food since the commencement of his stay in Washington, DC, being a period in excess of one week," Watkins wrote, adding, "It is understood the defendant has lost weight in excess of twenty pounds during the last week."

Watkins argued in the filing that Chansley was an actual shaman, and that as part of his religious beliefs, he does not eat non-organic foods. Consuming non-organic food, according to Watkins filing, "would act as an 'object intrusion' onto his body and cause serious illness if he were to eat it."

He further explained that "in shamanic traditions, the body, mind and soul are interconnected, and the well-being of all three are necessary for my client to be able to practice his faith."

The filing also included an [inmate request](#) in which Chansley wrote to the District of Columbia Department of Corrections that he required organic meals, and that he'd been eating such food for the past eight years.

"I have strayed from my spiritual diet only a few times over the last 8 years with detrimental physical effects," Chansley wrote. "As a spiritual man I am willing to suffer for my beliefs, hold to my convictions, and [feel] the weight of their consequences."

The latest development surrounding the horn-toting shaman came after he pleaded not guilty on Friday to charges that stemmed from his involvement in the Capitol siege. Chansley has been hit with charges including civil disorder, obstruction of an official proceeding and entering and remaining in a restricted building, among other violations.

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Ohio Charges Police Officer With Murder of Black Man - State Attorney General

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - Ohio police officer Adam Coy has been charged with murder in the killing of Andre Hill, a Black man, state Attorney General Dave Yost said in a press conference.

"Today, the Franklin County grand jury indicted Mr. Coy on the following charges: murder and commission of a felony - that felony being felonious assault," Yost said on Wednesday.

Coy has also been charged with a separate count of felonious assault, one count of dereliction of duty based on Coy's failure to activate his body camera, and one count of dereliction of duty based on his failure to inform a fellow officer that he felt Hill presented a danger, Yost said.

Coy was arrested on Wednesday and is scheduled to have a court arraignment on Thursday. In December, Coy, an officer with a history of excessive-force complaints, shot Hill as officers responded to a non-emergency disturbance complaint from a neighbor. Coy and another officer who responded - but did not fire a weapon - did not activate their body cameras until after the shooting had occurred.

However, the body cameras have a 60-second "look-back" feature that captures video, but not audio, which was released to the public.

The footage showed Hill emerging from a garage holding up a cellphone seconds before he is fatally shot. The video also appears to show that officers delayed giving medical aid to the man following the shooting.

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US Senators Propose Targeted Sanctions Against Russian Officials Over Navalny Case

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US senators introduced a bill calling for targeted sanctions against Russian officials over alleged poisoning and subsequent imprisonment of opposition activist Alexey Navalny, Senator Marco Rubio announced.

The bill, dubbed Holding Russia Accountable for Malign Activities Act, was first drafted last September and is being resubmitted after a Moscow court canceled Navalny's suspended sentence for the 2014 fraud case and replaced it with 3.5 years prison sentence because of him violating probation.

Apart from imposing sanctions on officials for being complicit in "brazen violations of international law," the legislation also directs the White House to determine if "the Kremlin has violated US laws prohibiting the use of chemical and biological weapons."

In addition, the bill calls for compiling reports on the assassination of Russia's former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov in 2015 and on the personal wealth of Russia's President Vladimir Putin and his "inner circle."

The bill was introduced by six senators - Marco Rubio, Chris Coons, Ben Cardin, Mitt Romney, Chris Van-Hollen and Dick Durbin.

Navalny was taken in custody last month upon returning to Russia from Germany where he received medical treatment following a suspected poisoning in Siberia. Germany has claimed that its health officials found evidence of poisoning - traces of a nerve agent from the Novichok group - in Navalny's organism. Russian authorities have consistently rejected the findings and requested for the evidence to be shared with them but without success.

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US Charges Leader of Honolulu Proud Boys in Connection to Capitol Riot - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - A US federal grand jury has charged the self-proclaimed leader of the Proud Boys' chapter in Honolulu, Hawaii, for his alleged role in the unrest at the US Capitol on January 6, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"A federal grand jury in the District of Columbia has returned an indictment charging a Hawaii man who purports to have founded the Honolulu chapter of the Proud Boys and a Texas man with conspiring to obstruct the United States Congress' certification of the results of the 2020 US Presidential Election, as well as other crimes they committed to achieve that goal," the release said on Wednesday.

Nicholas Ochs, 34, a resident of Honolulu, has been charged with conspiring to commit an offense against the United States, one count of theft of federal government property, one count of depredation against federal government property and three counts of unlawful entry in restricted buildings or grounds, the release said.

The Justice Department said Ochs stormed the US Capitol building on January 6 and documented the entry on his social media accounts.

Ochs and another individual wrote "Murder the Media" on a door inside the Capitol building, the release said.

Ochs could face up to 20 years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000, the release said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Justice Department said a member of the Proud Boys from the Seattle Chapter has also been charged in connection to the unrest at the US Capitol.

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US Plans First-Ever Bomber Deployment to Norway - Strategic Command

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - An advance team of US airmen arrived in Norway on Wednesday to prepare for the first deployment of US bombers to the Arctic nation, the Strategic Command (STRATCOM) said.

"US bombers are set to deploy to Norway for the first time. In preparation for that deployment, US Air Force personnel from Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, arrived today at Orland Air Base,

Norway. The Airmen are part of the advance team for scheduled missions that will execute in the coming weeks for a limited time," STRATCOM said in a press release on Wednesday. Training for the US Air Force personnel will include a variety of areas "ranging from operating in the high north to improving interoperability with allies and partners across the European theater," STRATCOM added.

The arriving Air Force advance team began a ten-day COVID-19 quarantine as recommended by the US Centers for Disease Control after testing negative for the disease prior to departure, according to STRATCOM.

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US Charges Member of Proud Boys for Role in January 6 Capitol Riot - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - A member of the nationalist organization Proud Boys has been charged in federal court for allegedly participating in the riot at the US Capitol on January 6, the Justice Department said.

"A member of the Proud Boys, a nationalist organization, was arrested today and charged in federal court in the District of Columbia with obstructing or impeding an official proceeding, among other charges," the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

Ethan Nordean 30, resident of the state of Washington, has been charged with obstructing or impeding an official proceeding, aiding and abetting, knowingly entering a restricted building and violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds, the release said.

Nordean could face up to 30 years in prison if convicted on the multiple charges, the release said.

Nordean is a self-described Sergeant-of-Arms of the Proud Boys' Seattle chapter.

The release said that prior to the January 6 incident, Nordean made several posts on social media suggesting he planned to organize a group to engage in conflict.

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US National Security Advisor, Polish Officials Discuss Cooperation on Russia, China

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan discussed with Polish officials cooperation on various foreign policy priorities, including China and Russia, National Security Council Emily Horne said in a statement.

Sullivan spoke over the telephone earlier on Wednesday with Poland's National Security Bureau Chief Pawel Soloch and Minister of State Krzysztof Szczerski.

"They agreed to cooperate on common challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, global economic recovery, and climate change," Horne said on Wednesday. "They also discussed the importance of working together on shared foreign policy priorities, including Russia and China.

Mr. Sullivan affirmed the Biden administration's commitment to supporting democratic institutions, the rule of law and human rights."

Horne also said that Sullivan emphasized the Biden administration's interest in boosting the bilateral ties, and expressed gratitude for Poland's cooperation with the United States on defense matters and its efforts to promote energy security in Central Europe.

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US Indicts Professor Who Took \$1.75Mln in NIH Grants, Hid China Ties - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - A former biomedical engineering professor at the University of Florida who won a \$1.75 million grant from the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) faces multiple charges for hiding ties with the Chinese government, the US Justice Department said.

"Lin Yang, 43, who resided in Tampa, Florida, at the time of the offenses, is charged with six counts of wire fraud and four counts of making false statements to an agency of the United States. The indictment, returned by a federal grand jury on Dec. 15, 2020, was unsealed today," the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

The Justice Department explained that Yang obtained a \$1.75 million grant from the NIH to develop and disseminate an imaging tool for muscles known as "MuscleMiner."

From September 2014 and July 2019, Yang served as the principal investigator for the NIH grant at the University of Florida - a period when he secretly applied for and won professor's post at China's Northwestern Polytechnic University and was accepted in China's Thousand Talents Program. He also established a business in China to sell the MuscleMiner machine, the Justice Department said.

In annual reports to NIH, Yang repeatedly hid his ties to China and denied receiving any support from a foreign government, the Justice Department also said.

Yang moved to China in August 2019 where he currently resides, making his arrest by US authorities unlikely, the Justice Department added.

The US plans to seize a house owned by Yang in the city of Tampa, Florida, according to the indictment.

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US House Panel Advances Resolution to Remove Congresswoman Greene From Committees

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The US House Rules Committee has advanced a resolution to remove Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene from her committee assignments for pushing unfounded conspiracy theories.

Greene has come under fire for pushing controversial conspiracy theories about school shootings, 9/11, causes of the California wildfires among others including anti-Semitic conspiracies.

The Democrat-controlled committee on Wednesday approved the rule to move forward with removing Greene from the House committees she is serving on.

House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy while condemning her remarks accused the Democrats of using the opportunity for yet another "power grab."

Earlier on Wednesday, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said a final vote on the resolution will be held on Thursday. The resolution to remove Greene will require a simple majority vote to pass.

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US Views Russia's Sputnik, RT as 'Tools of Propaganda' - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States considers RT and Sputnik to be "propaganda tools" of the Russian government, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said told reporters.

"I haven't spoken with the President about RT or Sputnik. I think it's pretty factual to say they are tools of propaganda who work on behalf of the Russian government," Psaki said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

Psaki also said she had "a little fun" with the journalists from these outlets when she served as a State Department spokesperson.

The work of the Russian media outlets in the West have become increasingly difficult in recent years. Western politicians, including those in the United States, have accused Sputnik and RT of engaging in disinformation and of meddling in election without providing any evidence. Russian officials have called such allegations unfounded.

Sputnik and RT have also faced direct pressure by Western governments and entities. The United States government forced the media outlets' partners to register as "foreign agents" and imposed frequent reporting requirements on them. In Germany, the country's Federation of Journalists has called on national regulators to deny RT Deutsch a broadcast license, claiming that the channel was a "tool for Kremlin propaganda."

Russia believes that the discrimination against Sputnik and RT in Europe is unacceptable and the claims that these new outlets are instruments of propaganda are absurd, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in September.

Sputnik and RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan has repeatedly slammed the allegations against the Russian media outlets and has criticized the Western governments and entities efforts to put pressure on them as acts contrary to their proclamations in favor of freedom of the press.

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Former Trump Aide Steve Bannon Faces Renewed Charges Despite Pardon - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - Former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, who was pardoned by ex-President Donald Trump, faces the same charges after New York prosecutors opened a state-level investigation, the New York Times reported.

Before receiving a pardon that applies only to federal crimes, Bannon was found guilty of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and launder money raised for building a wall along the United States border with Mexico.

"The Manhattan district attorney's office has begun investigating Mr. Bannon's role in the fund-raising project for the wall and is also considering opening an investigation into Ken Kurson, who was also pardoned by Mr. Trump after he was charged with federal crimes related to cyberstalking and harassment," the report said on Wednesday evening citing three people familiar with the matter.

According to the report, the decision came after Manhattan prosecutors reviewed the list of the 143 pardons and commutations issued by Trump in his last days in office.

Bannon pleaded not guilty when he was charged.

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Russia Urges New UNSC Members to Objectively View Syrian Chemical Dossier - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, February 3 (Sputnik) - Russia called on the five new UN Security Council member states to objectively treat the Syrian chemical dossier and note the country's readiness to cooperate with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said.

India, Ireland, Kenya, Mexico and Norway are the newly elected non-permanent member states of the UN Security Council with two-year mandates that started on January 1, 2021. The countries replaced former non-permanent members - Belgium, Germany, Dominican Republic, South Africa and Indonesia.

"I call on the Council, first and foremost, its newly arrived members, who can develop their own version of current developments and independent vision, to look at this situation from an objective view. The facts say that even amid complicated, military, political and epidemiological problems, Syria has not evaded its cooperation with the OPCW. It faithfully accommodates all inspections, provides materials and demonstrates readiness for dialogue in every possible way," Nebenzia said on Wednesday.

Nebenzia noted that Syria submitted to the OPCW Director-General last December its regular report on steps taken to comply with UN Security Council resolution requiring the country to

destroy its chemical weapons arsenal. In addition, Nebenzia said Syria has conveyed its readiness to cooperate on resolving all outstanding issues.

"Why don't all Western colleagues speak of these positive developments and deliberately instead shift their emphasis to the issues that remain open?" Nebenzia said.

The Russian ambassador pointed out that while almost every month Syria provides information about terrorists planning chemical weapons provocations, such data is not reflected in the OPCW documentation.

"We often hear urgent calls on Syria to cooperate more... It seems that the only thing that would meet these requirements would be Syria acknowledging its guilt and publicly confessing to all deadly sins," Nebenzia said.

In 2014, the OPCW set up the fact-finding mission to establish the truth about the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Russia has on numerous occasions accused the OPCW of being biased against Syria and claimed that the organization was being used as a political tool by Western countries to put pressure on "undesirable" states.

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US Charges Member of Proud Boys for Role in January 6 Capitol Riot - Justice Dept.

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Biden Approves COVID-19 Disaster Declaration to Aid Navajo Indian Nation - White House

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed a disaster declaration for the Navajo Indian Nation - a measure that increases federal aid for tribal efforts to fight the novel coronavirus pandemic, the White House said in a press release.

"Federal funding is available to the Navajo Nation and certain private nonprofit organizations for emergency protective measures, including direct Federal assistance, for the entire Tribe impacted by COVID-19," the release said on Wednesday.

The Navajo Nation in the Southwestern United States suffers from some of the nation's highest coronavirus infection and mortality rates, according to media reports.

A disaster declaration increases the amount of aid available from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

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US State Department Reaffirms 'One China' Policy - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters that the United States continues to adhere to "One China" policy notwithstanding tensions between Washington with Beijing and the close relations the United States continues to foster with Taiwan.

"Our policy has not changed. It's not changed," Price said when asked during a daily briefing if the Biden administration supports the "One China" policy.

The policy asserts that there is only one sovereign state called China. The policy dates back to 1979 when the United States moved to recognize the People's Republic of China and de-recognize the Republic of China - Taiwan's official name. The United States, however, refuses to recognize China's sovereignty over Taiwan.

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US National Security Advisor, Polish Officials Discuss Cooperation on Russia, China

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Sullivan spoke over the telephone with Poland's National Security Bureau Chief Pawel Soloch and Minister of State Krzysztof Szczerski.

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US to Monitor Nord Stream 2 Completion Efforts, May Use Sanctions - State Department

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States will be monitoring activities to complete Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline and may invoke sanctions, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

"I think what we can say is that we will monitor activity to complete or certify the pipeline and if such activity takes place we will make a determination on the applicability of sanctions," Price said Wednesday when asked at a daily briefing for comments on German press reports about potential softening of US stance on the project.

He added, however, that sanctions are "only one among many important tools" to address the issue.

"We will work closely with our allies and partners to reinforce European energy security and safeguard against predatory behavior against including that of Russia in this case," Price said. Nord Stream 2 is a planned 745-mile-long twin pipeline that will carry nearly 2 trillion cubic feet of gas annually from Russia to Germany. The United States is a vocal opponent of the project as it seeks to export more liquefied natural gas to Europe. Construction was suspended a year ago after American sanctions forced Swiss pipe-laying company Allseas to withdraw from Nord Stream 2, but resumed in December and is expected to take several months to complete.

The German authorities, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, have repeatedly rejected the US extraterritorial sanctions and said they consider Nord Stream 2 to be an economic rather than political project. German newspaper Handelsblatt reported on Tuesday that the US has for the first time ever signaled readiness to start negotiations on lifting sanctions against the pipeline.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) -

NEW START TREATY

* The agreement on the extension of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) entered into force on February 3, and Russia and the United States exchanged relevant notes, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday.

* Russia expects that the extension of the New START treaty to help overcome the trend of the arms control mechanisms breakdown, and is ready to work with the United States to strengthen global strategic stability, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* The United States considers the extension of the New START treaty with Russia as the beginning of efforts to solve nuclear and strategic issues, Defense Department spokesman John Kirby told reports on Wednesday.

* NATO welcomes the extension of the New START and values its contribution to international stability, the alliance said.

* The number of inspections under the extended New START will not change, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said.

US MILITARY STRATEGY

* The Biden administration is currently reviewing former President Donald Trump's order to withdraw US troops from Germany, European Command (USEUCOM) chief Gen. Tod Walters said on Wednesday.

* The United States considers international terror groups and the growing cooperation between Russia and China as the biggest threats to its interests, Walters said.

* More than 30,000 troops from the United States and allied and partner nations are set to participate in the upcoming Defender Europe 2021 exercise, Walters said.

* The Biden administration fully supports the Space Force and has no plan to revisit a decision to establish it, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters.

NAVALNY CASE

* The European Union will discuss the case of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny during the next Foreign Affairs Council scheduled for February 22, EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell said on Wednesday.

* The German government cannot rule out imposing new sanctions against Russia over the Moscow court decision to impose a prison sentence on Navalny, cabinet spokesman Steffen Seibert said on Wednesday.

* The Supreme Court of Russia upheld the rulings of lower-level courts, which ordered Navalny, his Anti-Corruption Foundation (designated as a foreign agent by the Russian Ministry of Justice) and his ally, FBK lawyer Lyubov Sobol, to pay 88 million rubles (\$1.15 million) to the Mosckovskiy Shkolnik (Moscow Pupil) catering company, which the FBK accused of spreading dysentery in schools.

* The Czech Foreign Ministry summoned Russian Ambassador in Prague Alexander Zmievsky and issued a protest note regarding the Moscow court's ruling on Navalny, the Czech Foreign Ministry said.

* The Russian Embassy in Prague said interference in Russia's domestic affairs is unacceptable after Ambassador Alexander Zmievsky was summoned to the Czech Foreign Ministry to be issued a protest note regarding the Navalny case.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

* The report on interim results of the phase 3 trials of Russia's Sputnik V, published in the Lancet medical journal, demonstrates the coronavirus vaccine's safety and efficacy, and confirms that accelerated registration was justified, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* The COVAX Facility, the multi-agency COVID-19 vaccine procurement and distribution initiative, has secured enough doses to cover 3.3 percent of the 145 participating countries over the first half of 2021, according to an interim report published on Wednesday.

MYANMAR DEVELOPMENTS

* G7 foreign ministers and the EU High Representative on Wednesday issued a joint statement in condemnation of the recent military coup in Myanmar and called for the restoration of the civilian government.

* The United Nations continues to closely monitor the situation in Myanmar and has over 2,500 personnel on the ground engaged in providing support to the population following the recent military coup in the country, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters.

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Congressional Study Group Says US Should Not Rush Troop Withdrawal From Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - A US congressionally mandated study group in a report released on Wednesday recommended that the United States not rush to pull troops out of Afghanistan if the Taliban fail to abide by the agreement it struck with Washington last February. "If the Taliban have not clearly met the conditions of the Doha agreement, the United States should avoid rushing to withdraw troops by May 2021," the report from the panel convened by the US Institute of Peace said.

The Afghanistan Study Group, a bipartisan task force established by Congress in 2019, is co-chaired by General Joseph Dunford and former Senator Kelly Ayotte.

The US-Taliban deal signed in February of last year requires the US to withdraw all forces in exchange for counterterrorism assurances. However, US officials have said the Taliban have failed to split from al-Qaeda as required by the agreement.

A Taliban official last week said they will shoot any Americans who remain in Afghanistan beyond the exit date.

The Trump administration reduced troop levels in Afghanistan from 14,000 to 2,500.

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Canadian Privacy Commissioners Say Clearview AI Engaged in Illegal Mass Surveillance

TORONTO, February 3 (Sputnik) - An investigation by Canadian privacy commissioners has concluded that Clearview AI's gathering of billions of photographs amounts to mass surveillance and is illegal, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada said on Wednesday.

"What Clearview does is mass surveillance and it is illegal. It is completely unacceptable for millions of people who will never be implicated in any crime to find themselves continually in a police lineup," Daniel Therrien, Privacy Commissioner of Canada, said in the statement.

The investigation found that law enforcement and commercial organizations used the company's database containing over 3 billion images, which included photos of Canadians of all ages, for investigatory purposes, despite the overwhelming majority of these individuals having committed no crime and unlikely to do so in the future.

The investigation also revealed that Clearview had 48 contracts with law enforcement agencies around the country, including Canada's state policy agency, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Clearview wound down operations in Canada after the investigation began and cut ties with the RCMP, the only remaining client, in July 2020.

The makers of the report – the federal privacy commissioner along with privacy commissioners from the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec – have called on Clearview to stop

offering its services to Canadian clients, stop collecting images of Canadians, and delete all previously collected digital and biometrical data, the statement said.

Although Clearview stopped providing its services to law enforcement, the company has not complied with other recommendations, the statement said. Canada's privacy regulators added that should the company continue to ignore the recommendations they would seek legal action pursuant to the appropriate regulatory frameworks.

Clearview AI has courted controversy for mining billions of users' images from social media sites for its platform.

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US Capitol Riot Prompts Congress Request for Secret Service Security Briefing - Committee

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee asked the Secret Service for a closed-door briefing on presidential security, including intelligence on extremists who stormed the Capitol on January 6, in a letter to Secret Service Director James Murray on Wednesday.

"Since the events of January 6, 2021, law enforcement and intelligence officials have warned about increased 'chatter' among various domestic violent extremists (DVEs) and militia organizations online, some of whom may be plotting attacks with significant consequences for US national security," the letter said.

The committee also sought information on a Joint Intelligence Bulletin by the FBI, Department of Homeland Security and National Counterterrorism Center prior to the January 6 storming of the Capitol building.

The assessment reportedly warned of violence by "ideologically-motivated violent extremists with objections to the exercise of governmental authority and the presidential transition," the letter said.

It remains unclear why few Capitol Police officers were in place when the angry supporters of then-President Donald Trump stormed the Capitol rotunda, House and Senate chambers and lawmaker offices in a battle with understaffed law enforcement.

"It is imperative that the Secret Service provide Congress with a complete threat assessment and security briefing to ensure that your agency has the resources and authorities necessary to ensure the successful completion of its protective security mission," said the letter signed by committee Chair Carolyn Maloney and ranking Republican Stephen Lynch.

The letter also requested an analysis of the how threats from extremists affect security of the President, Vice President, former Presidents and Vice Presidents, and their families, as well as the state of intelligence sharing and coordination between federal, state, and local law enforcement.

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US Could Take Till 2050 to Return to Pre-COVID Energy Consumption - EIA Outlook

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - It could take up to 30 years for US energy consumption to return to pre-pandemic levels, the Energy Information Administration said in an outlook published Wednesday that assumes low economic growth will rein in demand in the near future. "The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on energy consumption behavior and economic activity will have a lasting impact on US energy consumption," Stephen Nalley, acting administrator at the EIA, said in a live-streamed briefing on the Annual Energy Outlook 2021. The EIA projected that total US energy consumption will return to 2019 levels by 2029, although that projection is highly dependent on the pace of US economic recovery. In a case that assumes low economic growth, energy consumption does not return to 2019 levels until 2050, it added.

"The high economic growth path could take 10 or less. The low economic growth scenario could take 30 years," Nalley told the briefing.

In 2020, the economy shrank 3.5 percent as the COVID-19 bore its full brunt on gross domestic product.

In a positive light, the EIA projected that the slow growth in US fossil-fuels consumption will result in less energy-related carbon-dioxide emissions through 2035 at least. That would aid, at least, in part the Biden administration's plan to sharply reduce greenhouse gases in coming decades, achieving by no later than 2050 a 100 percent clean-energy economy with net-zero emissions.

Renewable electric generating technologies are projected to account for almost 60 percent of the capacity additions from 2020 to 2050, the EIA said, adding that renewables' share of the electricity generation mix will more than double by 2050.

The natural gas share will remain relatively flat at 36%, and the coal and nuclear shares will both fall by about half, according to baseline projections in the outlook.

Also importantly, while ongoing record domestic energy production supported natural gas exports, it did not necessarily mean growth in the US trade balance in petroleum products, the EIA said. Breaking this down, the agency projected that the United States will continue to export more petroleum and other liquids than it imports, but the balance of imports to exports will be highly sensitive to supply, demand, and price factors.

Notwithstanding the expectations in its outlook, the EIA said high oil and natural gas supply or high oil prices could result in increased domestic production and net exports.

But if prices or supply remain high, the United States is likely to export more energy than it imports through 2050, it added.

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Pentagon Says New START Extension Kicks Off Efforts to Address Nuclear, Strategic Concerns

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) – The United States considers the extension of the New START Treaty with Russia as the beginning of efforts to solve nuclear and strategic issues, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reports on Wednesday.

"The President has made clear that the New START extension is the beginning of efforts to address nuclear and strategic stability concerns," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Reviewing Reinstating Temporary Protected Status for Certain Countries - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is currently reviewing reinstating the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for the countries which were stripped by the former administration, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

Last week, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that the US government has prolonged TPS for eligible Syrian nationals in the United States through September of next year.

"It is all under review at this point in time," Psaki said when asked about TPS.

The president, she added, has talked about his own commitment to reinstating TPS in certain cases but the review has not been completed at this point in time.

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US Views Russia's Sputnik, RT as 'Tools of Propaganda' - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States considers RT and Sputnik to be 'propaganda tools' of the Russian government, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"I haven't spoken with the President about RT or Sputnik. I think it's pretty factual to say they are tools of propaganda who work on behalf of the Russian government," Psaki said.

Psaki said she had "a little fun" with the journalists from these outlets when she was a State Department spokesperson.

The situation with Russian media in the West has become increasingly difficult in recent years with Western politicians, including those from the United States, accusing Sputnik and RT of election meddling, albeit without providing any evidence. Russian officials have called such allegations unfounded.

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UPDATE - US Halts Lawsuit Accusing Yale University of Bias Against Asians, Whites - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The US government dropped a Trump administration lawsuit accusing Yale University of discriminating against Asian and White applicants for undergraduate admission, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"The Department has dismissed its lawsuit in light of all available facts, circumstances, and legal developments, including the November 2020 decision by the US Court of Appeals for the First Circuit rejecting a challenge to Harvard University's consideration of race in its admissions practices," a spokesperson said on condition of anonymity.

In a similar case, the appellate court in the city of Boston upheld Harvard's use of race in undergraduate admission decision, rejecting a lawsuit claiming the elite university discriminates against Asian-American applicants.

At the time, opponents said they would appeal the decision to the US Supreme Court in hopes that the court's 6-3 conservative majority will end the longtime practice by colleges and university of considering applicants' race and ethnicity to achieve diversity in their respective student bodies.

The department also said it had withdrawn a letter from the Trump administration's Justice Department notifying Yale that its admissions practices violate Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The measure prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs and activities that receive financial assistance from the federal government.

The Trump administration sued Yale University in October as part of a campaign against affirmative action in US university admissions criteria.

An earlier US Supreme Court ruling allows universities to use race- and ethnic-based criteria in limited circumstances.

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US Space Force Has Full Support of Biden Administration - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The US administration fully supports the Space Force and has no plan to revisit a decision to establish it, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

Psaki on Tuesday came under fire for comments critics felt diminished the importance of the Space Force.

"They absolutely have the full support of the Biden administration, and we are not revisiting the decision to establish the Space Force," Psaki said during press briefing.

Pentagon intends desire to focus greater attention and resources on security in space, she added.

"The Space Force was established by Congress, and steps would actually have to be taken by Congress, not by the administration, Psaki said.

On Tuesday, Psaki was asked about US President Joe Biden's plans on the future of the Space Force. The spokeswoman answered that the Space Force was a "plane of today," reportedly referring to a question regarding the Air Force One aircraft color scheme that she answered at one of previous briefings. The answer sparked criticism among lawmakers from states connected with the space industry, who believe that the remark diminished the role of the space force.

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Biden to Speak 'Broadly' on Foreign Policy in State Dept. Address - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will broadly address foreign policy matters during the planned speech at the State Department on Thursday but will not outline his vision on every issue, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday. "He will also of course talk broadly about foreign policy," Biden said. "This will not be a laydown of his vision on every issue, every foreign policy issue."

Biden will deliver a major foreign policy speech during his visit at the State Department on Thursday.

Psaki said earlier in the week that 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."

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

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Biden Has Spoken With Number of Allies About Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has talked about a number of matters with his allies including issues regarding Russia, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"The President has certainly spoken with a number of European allies about a range of mutual interest, of course, including Russia," Psaki said.

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UN Welcomes Data on Russia's Sputnik V Vaccine Published in 'Lancet' - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomed the report in the medical journal "The Lancet," which stated that the Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V is safe and effective, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday. On Tuesday, the medical journal "The Lancet" published an interim analysis from the phase 3 trial of the Russian vaccine, showing its 91.6 percent efficacy against symptomatic COVID-19. "This is very welcome news on yet another vaccine," Dujarric said when asked to comment on the topic. "We need to just salute the scientists around the world who have done amazing work in the last year."

When asked about the status of the Russia's proposal to vaccinate all UN staff with Sputnik V, Dujarric said the organization is still discussing the offer with the World Health Organization and is awaiting its clearance.

During a speech at the UN General Assembly in September, Russian President Vladimir Putin offered the Sputnik V vaccine to all UN employees worldwide free of charge.

Sputnik V, developed by the Gamaleya Epidemiology and Microbiology Center and registered by the Russian Health Ministry on August 11, was the world's first vaccine against the novel coronavirus. The vaccine shows 91.6 percent efficacy and is 100 percent effective against severe complications. The vaccine consists of two components that are applied to a person within an interval of 21 days.

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White House Calls on Russia to Swiftly Release US Citizens Reed, Whelan

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration calls on Russia to swiftly release detained US citizens Trevor Reed and Paul Whelan, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

"I will use this opportunity to once again call on Russia to swiftly release both Mr. Reed and Paul Whelan," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Washington has raised this issue before with Russia at various levels, she added.

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US Army to Focus Major 2021 Drill on South Eastern Europe - General

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The US Army plans to focus its major "Defender" exercise in 2021 on moving forces to countries of southeastern Europe, head of US Army Europe and Africa Command Christopher Cavoli said on Wednesday.

"We are planning on doing it in southeastern Europe so that we can exercise some of those lines of communication and some of the strategic deployment set down there," Cavoli said during a webinar hosted by the Association of the US Army.

"Defender" is a series of annual drills, during which the US Army exercises to deploy a large force overseas. Cavoli said that in 2020 about 10,000 soldiers and 13,000 pieces of equipment were moved over.

"In 2021, we are planning on moving fewer maneuver forces and more high-end enablers," he said. Cavoli added that during the exercise the US military will work closely with Romania and Bulgaria, praising both armies for moving "quickly with their modernization plans."

US officials said earlier that "Defender 2021" is scheduled tentatively for late spring or the beginning of summer.

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Delivery of 35Mln AstraZeneca Vaccine Doses to Americas Begins in February - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - Thirty six nations in the Americas that belong to the World Health Organization's (WHO) COVAX distribution program will receive the first of 35 million coronavirus vaccine doses beginning next month, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) said on Wednesday.

"Over the weekend, the countries received letters from COVAX detailing the doses that they had been allocated," PAHO Director Carissa Etienne said in a press release.

The first of 35 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine will begin arriving in late February, PAHO said.

COVAX, or the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility, was launched in April 2020 by the WHO, the Global Vaccine Alliance and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations to help distribute vaccines to the world's poorest nations.

Etienne also reported that during the past week, more than 1.8 million people in the Americas tested positive for the novel coronavirus, with nations in Central America and the Caribbean reporting increased number of cases despite declines reported in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

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Canada Designates Proud Boys, Atomwaffen Group as Terrorist Entities - Public Safety Chief

TORONTO, February 3 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has designated 13 groups as terrorist entities among which are far-right collectives the Proud Boys and the Atomwaffen Division, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair said on Wednesday.

"Today, we have placed 13 new groups [on the list of terrorist entities], including four ideologically motivated violent extremist groups. Those four groups include the Atomwaffen Division, the Base, the Proud Boys and the Russian Imperial movement," Blair said during a virtual press briefing.

The list also includes three Al Qaida affiliates - Ansar Dine, Front de Liberation du Macina and Jama'at Nusrat Al-Islam Wal-Muslimin - as well as five entities under the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) and Hizbul Mujahideen.

Blair said that the far-right collectives pose a current and serious threat to Canada's national security. The public admitted that he is aware of the Canadian parliament's unanimous approval for a motion to designate the Proud Boys as a terrorist entity last week and the unrest that occurred at the US Capitol on January 6, but said that the decision was not political in nature and that due process was followed.

Canadian experts have warned that politicizing the terror listing process could set a dangerous precedent. Respond to questions concerning civil liberties, Blair reiterated that the designation was the result of evidence and intelligence gathered by law enforcement.

Blair would not speak to specific threats posed by the far-right groups but said that their activity has escalated since first popping up on Canadian law enforcement's radar in 2018.

The designation will allow Canadian authorities to pursue these entities through legal processes, conduct surveillance and curtail funding to the groups, Blair said.

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Results of Trial of Russia's Sputnik V Coronavirus Vaccine 'Encouraging' - Fauci
WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The results of the Russian trial of the Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine are encouraging, US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci said on Wednesday.

"We live in a global community, and it is encouraging to see that other countries are coming out with results from their own vaccine trial, such as the Russian trial that we heard about a day or two ago," Fauci said during a press briefing.

Fauci emphasized the importance of getting control over the spread of the novel coronavirus globally given that such an achievement will play a critical role in preventing the virus from mutating drastically.

Sputnik V, developed by the Gamaleya Epidemiology and Microbiology Center and registered by the Russian Health Ministry on August 11, was the world's first vaccine against the novel coronavirus. The vaccine shows 91.4 percent efficacy and is 100 percent effective against severe complications. The vaccine consists of two components that are applied to a person within an interval of 21 days.

The vaccine is based on the well-studied human adenovirus vector platform and has previously received regulatory approvals in Algeria, Argentina, Belarus, Bolivia, Hungary, Mexico, Palestine, Paraguay, Russia, Serbia, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates and Venezuela. The process of registering the Sputnik V vaccine in the European Union and the World Health Organization has already been initiated.

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Guterres Says Will Donate \$500,000 Prize From Human Fraternity Award to UN Refugee Agency

UNITED NATIONS, February 3 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that he will donate the prize of \$500,000 he received upon acceptance of the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity to the United Nations Refugee Agency.

Earlier on Wednesday, Guterres was awarded the 2021 Zayed Award for Human Fraternity which recognizes the work in driving human progress and includes a prize of \$1 million. Along with the UN chief, the award was given to Moroccan-French activist Latifa Ibn Ziaten.

"I have decided to donate the prize money - \$500,000 - to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UN Refugee Agency] to buttress its indispensable efforts to protect the most vulnerable members of the human family – the forcibly displaced," Guterres said in a statement.

Guterres explained he decided to donate the prize money to the UN Refugee Agency because he is seeking to promote common humanity amid a series of ongoing global crises.

"As the world faces the COVID-19 pandemic, an economic crisis, a climate emergency and threats to peace, unity and solidarity are more important than ever," Guterres said.

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Bayer Agrees to Pay \$2Bln to Resolve Future Roundup Claims - Company Statement

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - German pharmaceutical giant Bayer has agreed to pay \$2 billion to resolve future claims alleging that Monsanto's Roundup weedkiller causes cancer, the company said on Wednesday.

"Bayer announced today a formal agreement with plaintiffs' class counsel on a class plan designed to manage and resolve future Roundup cases... As part of the agreement, the company would be committed to pay up to 2 billion US Dollars, provision for which was made and disclosed last year, to support the claims and programs covered by the class plan," the company said in a press release.

Individuals who have not sued the company may be eligible to receive some compensation based on guidelines set in the agreement, the release said. The deal is part of the company's effort to provide closure to the litigation, according to the release.

In June 2020, Bayer said it would pay up to \$10.9 billion to resolve current and potential future Roundup litigation. The German company said \$8.8 billion to \$9.6 billion will be paid to settle 75 percent of some 125,000 filed and unfiled claims, with the rest going to support a separate class agreement to address potential future litigation.

In 2018, Bayer acquired US-biotech giant Monsanto, which produces Roundup, and inherited claims related to similar allegations.

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Some 2,500 UN Personnel in Myanmar Assist Civilians Amid Coup - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United Nations continues to closely monitor the situation in Myanmar and has over 2,500 personnel on the ground engaged in providing support to the population following the recent military coup in the country, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Wednesday.

"We're obviously watching the situation very closely with concern," Dujarric said. "We have more than 2500 personnel in Myanmar both international and national staff providing crucial development and humanitarian support to the people of Myanmar in their pursuit of democracy, peace, human rights and the rule of law."

Dujarric also said that the latest developments come at a particularly difficult time for the country experiencing a public health emergency, and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic must remain a priority for the foreseeable future.

Myanmar's military launched a coup on Monday morning and detained Suu Kyi, Myint and other National League for Democracy (NLD) members. 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 also 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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Canada Designates Proud Boys, Atomwaffen Group as Terrorist Entities - Public Safety Chief

TORONTO, February 3 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has designated 13 new groups as terrorist entities among which are far-right collectives, the Proud Boys and the Atomwaffen Division, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair said on Wednesday.

"Today, we have placed 13 new groups [on the list of terrorist entities], including four ideologically motivated violent extremist groups. Those four groups include the Atomwaffen Division, the Base, the proud boys and the Russian Imperial movement," Blair said during a virtual press briefing.

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UN Welcomes Extension of New START Treaty Between US, Russia - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomed the extension by five years of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) between Russia and the United States that represents a first step toward reinvigorating the nuclear disarmament regime, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Wednesday.

"We very much welcome the five-year extension of the New START as a means of maintaining verifiable limits on the world's largest nuclear arsenals," Dujarric said. "I think it's a first step of reinvigorating the nuclear arms control regime."

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Pandemic Hit Global Air Travel With Record 75.6% Drop in 2020 - Trade Group

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - International air passenger traffic suffered a record one-year drop in 2020, with the COVID-19 crisis resulting in a plunge of more than 75 percent from pre-pandemic levels, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said on Wednesday.

"Last year was a catastrophe. There is no other way to describe it," IATA Director-General Alexandre de Juniac said in a press release announcing the latest data. "What recovery there was over the Northern hemisphere summer season stalled in autumn and the situation turned dramatically worse over the year-end holiday season, as more severe travel restrictions were imposed in the face of new outbreaks and new strains of COVID-19."

Overall air passenger traffic, which includes domestic and international routes, fell by 65.9 percent compared with 2019, "by far the sharpest traffic decline in aviation history." International passenger traffic dropped 75.6 from the previous year, the IATA said.

Furthermore, bookings began falling sharply in late December, with January 2021 reservations down 70 percent compared with a year ago, the trade group added.

The IATA predicted passenger traffic this year would rebound about 50 percent from last year's levels, but warned of downside risk as new variants of the coronavirus emerge, threatening the imposition of additional lockdowns by individual nations.

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US COVID-19 Cases Declining, Downward Trend Set to Continue - Health Official

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The number of new coronavirus cases and related hospitalizations in the United States continues appears to be in a consistent downward trajectory, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday.

"Cases and hospital admissions continue to decrease and we now appear to be in a consistent downward trajectory for both of these important outcomes," Walensky said during a press briefing.

Walensky said coronavirus cases have declined steadily since hitting a peak on January 8, dropping 13.4 percent to an average of nearly 144,000 new cases each day.

The number of coronavirus-related hospital admissions has continued to decline since reaching a peak on January 5, decreasing 4.1 percent to an average of about 11,400 new admissions each day, Walensky said.

Walensky said although the number of COVID-19-related deaths continues to increase, the pace appears to be slowing and should start to decrease in the coming weeks.

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One in 4 Americans Say 'Never' When Asked if They Will Take COVID-19 Vaccine - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - Half of US adults want the COVID-19 vaccine, a quarter refuse and the remainder plan to wait and see what happens when inoculations become available, a Monmouth University poll said Wednesday.

"Half (50%) of the public plans to get the Covid vaccine as soon as they are allowed. Those willing to be at the front of the line represent a majority of American adults when combined with the 6% who report already receiving the vaccine," a press release explaining the poll said.

"However, 24% say it is likely they will never get the vaccine if they can avoid it."

The remaining 19 percent plan to wait and see what happens as numbers of vaccinated people expand, the poll revealed.

The poll also showed what Monmouth called an "enormous" age-based gap in vaccination willingness among Republicans and Republican leaning independent voters.

Specifically, 63 percent of Republican identifiers aged 65 and older have either received or want to be first in line for the vaccine, while just 18 percent say they will avoid getting it. Among Republicans under 65 years old, only 33 percent are willing to line up for the vaccine right away, while nearly half (45%) never want to get it, Monmouth said.

In contrast, the poll showed little correlation between age and plans to be vaccinated among Democrats and Democratic leaners, with 71 percent of elderly survey participants wanting the vaccine compared with 70 percent of those under age 65.

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US Partners With State of California to Open 2 Vaccination Sites - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The US federal government is partnering with the state of California to open two community vaccination centers, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said on Wednesday.

"Today I'm pleased to announce the federal government will partner with the state of California to launch two new community vaccination centers," Zients said during a virtual press briefing. One vaccination center will be located in the east side of the city of Oakland and the second in the east side of Los Angeles, which are two of the communities most hard hit by the pandemic, Zients said.

Zients said the federal government is on track to beat President Joe Biden's goal of administering 100 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine in his first hundred days in office. The US state of California has reported more than 3.3 million residents who have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. However, one third of the cases, or more than 1.1 million, have been reported in Los Angeles County alone.

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US Senators Discuss With Biden Challenges in US-Russia Relations

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - US Senator Chris Coons told reporters on Wednesday that he discussed during his meeting with President Joe Biden some of the challenges in the relations between the United States and Russia.

Biden is holding a series of consultations at the White House with Democratic lawmakers on his efforts to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic and advance his \$1.9 trillion economic relief plan.

"We talked some about President Biden's conversation with [Russian President] Vladimir Putin, about some of the challenges in the US-Russia relationship - the arrest of [opposition figure Alexey] Navalny, the SolarWind hack and the bounties on our troops," Coons said after he and Senator Tom Carper emerged from the meeting.

Both senators represent Delaware, Biden's home state.

Biden's call to Putin is believed to be instrumental in reaching an agreement to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) - the only arms control regime in effect between Russia and the United States - for another five years. Biden had previously ordered a comprehensive intelligence review of the alleged adversarial Russian activities.

Coons said he and Carper also talked with Biden about the US-China relationship with respect to "where we are going and what the direction is going to be under this administration."

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US on Track to Administer 100Mln Doses of Coronavirus Vaccine in 100 Days - White House

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is on track to administer more than 100 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine in the first hundred days of the Biden administration, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said on Wednesday. "We are on track to beat the president's goal of a 100 million shots in a hundred days," Zients said during a press briefing.

Zients said the United States is currently administering an average of 1.3 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine each day.

On Tuesday, Zients said the federal government will provide a minimum of 10.5 million doses of the vaccine each week over the next three weeks.

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US Halts Lawsuit Accusing Yale University of Bias Against Asians, Whites - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The US government dropped a Trump administration lawsuit accusing Yale University of discriminating against Asian and White applicants, the Justice Department said in a court filing on Wednesday.

Without explanation, the document said: "NOTICE OF VOLUNTARY DISMISSAL."

The document then cited a provision in US law that allows the plaintiff to "voluntarily dismiss an action without a court order by filing a 'notice of dismissal.'"

The Trump administration sued Yale University in October as part of a campaign against racial and ethnic preferences in admissions to elite US universities.

An earlier US Supreme Court ruling allows universities to use race- and ethnic-based criteria in limited circumstances.

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Russian Ambassador in US: We Hope for Lavrov-Blinken Contacts Soon

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov expressed hope on Wednesday that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and State Secretary Antony Blinken will establish contacts in the near future.

When asked what questions he would offer the Biden administration to discuss, Antonov said, "Restoring contacts at all levels."

"There has been the first contact between the presidents. The presidents defined the priorities. It's clear for us where to move, what to expect," Antonov said. "I expect that in the near future there will be contacts between the Foreign Minister and Secretary of State Blinken."

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International Court of Justice Will Hear Iran's Case Seeking to Lift US Sanctions - Ruling

UNITED NATIONS, February 3 (Sputnik) - The International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a ruling on Wednesday rejecting the United States' objections to its jurisdiction over Iran's bid to overturn US nuclear-related sanctions that were re-introduced by the former Trump administration.

"The court, unanimously, rejects the preliminary objection to its jurisdiction raised by the United States of America according to which the subject-matter of the dispute does not relate to the interpretation or application of the Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights of 1955," the ruling said.

Iran filed an application to initiate the proceedings in July 2018, saying the United States violated the 1957 Treaty of Amity by reimposing all sanctions that were previously lifted. In 2018, the Trump reinstated sanctions on Iran as part of a maximum pressure campaign after unilaterally pulling the United States out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement.

The ruling comes as the new US President Joe Biden has expressed readiness to rejoin the nuclear agreement should Iran return to full compliance.

The ICJ dismissed all other US objections in deciding to hear the case, but is expected to take years before reaching a final ruling.

Judgments of the Hague-based UN organ are binding, final and without the possibility to appeal. The ICJ was set up after the World War II to settle disputes between states.

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Over 30,000 Troops From 26 Nations to Take Part in Defender Europe 2021 Drills - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - More than 30,000 troops from the United States and allied and partner nations are set to participate in the upcoming Defender Europe 2021 exercise, European Command (USEUCOM) chief Gen. Tod Walters told reporters on Wednesday.

"We anticipate that over 30,000 US allies and partner forces will get together stretching all the way from the Baltic to Africa," Walters said during a press briefing.

Walters explained that the participating troops represent 26 nations, but refrained from providing any details about the exercise.

"Planning is ongoing," Walters said.

Defender Europe 2021 will be all domain exercise and will demonstrate the US and partner nations' ability to lift and shift large forces over a large area, Walters added.

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Russia-China Cooperation, Terror Groups Represent Biggest Threats to US - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The United States considers international terror groups and the growing cooperation between Russia and China as the biggest threats to its interests, US European Command (USEUCOM) Commander Gen. Tod Walters told reporters on Wednesday.

"Our focus and vigilance is sky-high with respect the relationship between Russia and China, and certainly with respect to international terror groups," Walters said during a press briefing. Walters emphasized the issue of terrorist activity around the world, saying it remains the number one threat.

"It is something that we are concerned about in 2021, and I suspect it will be concern years and decades from now," he said.

With respect to Russia and China, Walters pointed out that each country can advance their mutual interest, but especially so if they deepen their cooperation. Such a development can be detrimental for Europe, he added.

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Biden Administration Reviewing Trump Order to Withdraw US Troops From Germany - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is currently reviewing former President Donald Trump's order to withdraw US troops from Germany, European Command (USEUCOM) chief Gen. Tod Walters told reporters on Wednesday.

"There are a lot of consultations ongoing. The US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is at this moment of conducting a very thorough review," Walters said during a press briefing.

The EUCOM commander pointed out that Austin will receive advice from the civilian and military leadership in considering issues such as the withdrawal of US troops from Germany.

In July, the US government confirmed plans to reduce its forces from Germany by some 12,000 troops. Some analysts saw the Trump administration move as a punishment for Berlin's alleged failure to allocate 2 percent of its budget for defense as per NATO regulations.

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US Senate Committee Advances Nomination of Jennifer Granholm for Energy Secretary

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee has voted on Wednesday to advance the nomination of President Joe Biden's pick Jennifer Granholm to be the next Secretary of Energy.

The Energy and Natural Resources Committee voted 13-4 to advance Granholm's nomination. Granholm has pledged she would protect jobs while working to transition the United States to sustainable energy sources.

Granholm served as governor of Michigan from 2003 to 2011 during which time she aggressively pushed renewable energy initiatives in line with Biden's current stated plans to combat climate change, including a pledge to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

The nomination of the former Michigan Governor will now go before the full Senate for a final vote.

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NASA Creates Senior Advisory Position to Focus on Biden Administration Climate Goals

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - NASA created a new post of Senior Climate Adviser to support Biden administration efforts to combat climate change and named Goddard Institute for Space Science (GISS) Director Gavin Schmidt to fill the post on an acting basis, the space agency announced on Wednesday.

"This position will provide NASA leadership critical insights and recommendations for the agency's full spectrum of science, technology, and infrastructure programs related to climate," acting NASA Administrator Steve Jurczyk said in a press release. "This will enable the agency to more effectively align our efforts to help meet the administration's goals for addressing climate change."

NASA noted that it operates more than two dozen satellites and instruments observing key climate indicators, making it the premier government agency in observing and understanding changes to the Earth.

Schmidt, who will initially fill the Climate Adviser post, is an expert on climate modeling and the author more than 150 research papers on the topic that have been published in peer-reviewed literature, NASA said.

President Joe Biden has set a goal of net-zero greenhouse gas emissions with a 2050 target date with the interim goal of decarbonizing the US power sector by 2035.

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UN Human Rights Office Calls on Russia to Release All Peaceful Protesters - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, February 3 (Sputnik) - The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) called for an immediate release of all peaceful protesters detained during the

recent unauthorized rallies in Russia, OHCHR Spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani said in a statement on Wednesday.

"We urge the authorities in Russia to immediately release all those detained for exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression yesterday and over the past few weeks of protests across the country," Shamdasani said. "There are reports that the number of people arrested yesterday was as high as 1,400."

Shamdasani said, OHCHR also voiced its dismay over the sentencing of Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny to 3.5 years in prison for violating the conditions of a suspended sentence that the European Court of Human Rights in 2017 had unanimously found to be arbitrary and unfair.

A Moscow court replaced Navalny's suspended sentence in the 2014 case on funds embezzlement from the Yves Rocher company with a real jail term of 3.5 years. The hearing was held at the request of the federal prison authority due to multiple probation violations.

On January 23 and January 31, unauthorized protests took place in many Russian cities in support of Navalny, who was detained in Moscow last month upon his arrival from Germany, where he was treated for alleged poisoning. According to the police, some 4,000 people attended the January 23 rally, and approximately 2,000 demonstrators took to the streets a week later.

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US Supreme Court Cancels Oral Arguments for Trump-Era Immigration Cases - Order

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) – The US Supreme Court said in an order on Wednesday that it has cleared its schedule of oral arguments dedicated to Trump-era cases concerning border wall funding and the so-called "Remain in Mexico" asylum program, officially known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP).

"The motions to hold further briefing in abeyance and to remove the cases from the February 2021 argument calendar are granted," the order said.

On Tuesday, it was revealed that the Biden administration had submitted documents asking the Supreme Court to cancel oral arguments scheduled in the coming weeks on Trump-era immigration related cases. It is unclear whether the hearings will be rescheduled for a later date. The Biden administration has also asked that oral arguments scheduled for March 1 regarding the legality of the MPP program, which required asylum-seeking migrants to temporarily return to Mexico for the duration of their proceedings, be canceled. The Supreme Court has not made a decision on this request.

President Joe 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 MPP program while his team reviews the Trump-era policies.

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Global Air Cargo Demand Falls by 10.6% in 2020, Biggest Drop Since 1990 - IATA

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - Global air cargo demand fell by a record 10.6 percent last year amid the coronavirus pandemic, in the steepest plunge on record since 1990, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said on Wednesday.

"Global demand in 2020, measured in cargo tonne-kilometers (CTKs*), was 10.6% below 2019 levels (-11.8% for international operations)," IATA said in a press release. "This was the largest drop in year-on-year demand since IATA started to monitor cargo performance in 1990, outpacing the 6% fall in global trade in goods."

The association also noted that global capacity, measured in available cargo tonne-kilometers decreased by 23.3% last year compared to 2019, more than double the contraction in demand. The IATA went on to say that economic conditions are improving as the 2021 year has started. "The new export orders component of the manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) is in growth territory in both developed and emerging markets. And global industrial production has also recovered," it said.

IATA said in January that global demand for passenger flights has decreased by 70.3 percent this past November, compared to November 2019, due to the coronavirus-related measures implemented by countries.

The association added that the global demand for air freight shrunk by 6.6 percent this November, compared to the previous year's figures.

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UPDATE: Biden Admin Extends New Start Treaty Through February 5 - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The administration of US President Joe Biden has honored its commitment to extend the New Start Treaty with Russia for the next five years, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, the United States took the first step toward making good on that pledge when it extended the New START Treaty with the Russian Federation for five years," Blinken said. "Extending the New START Treaty ensures we have verifiable limits on Russian ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers until February 5, 2026."

Earlier on Wednesday, Russia's Foreign Ministry said both Russia and the US on February 3 exchanged the relevant diplomatic notes to extend the treaty for five years.

Blinken said in the statement that Russia has been in compliance with the treaty since it went into force in 2011.

He added that during the five-year extension, the US will work with Russia and in consultation with Congress and US allies pursue further "arms control that addresses all of its nuclear weapons."

Blinken said Washington hopes that arms control agreements can minimize the dangers coming from "China's modern and growing nuclear arsenal."

The top US diplomat also emphasized that the extension of New START would not impact Washington's positions on other matters involving Russia.

"We remain clear eyed about the challenges that Russia poses to the United States and the world," he said. "Even as we work with Russia to advance US interests, so too will we work to hold Russia to account for adversarial actions as well as its human rights abuses, in close coordination with our allies and partners."

Moscow expects that the extension the New START will help overcome the trend to break down arms control mechanisms, and is ready to work with the United States to strengthen global strategic stability, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday.

According to the ministry, significant efforts will be needed to return the Russian-US dialogue in this area "back to a more stable trajectory, reach new substantial results which would strengthen our national security and global strategic stability."

On Friday, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the law on the ratification of the agreement extending the New START treaty with the US for 5 years.

New START has been in force since 2011 and was due to expire on February 5. It is the only remaining legally binding agreement on nuclear arms control between the two countries that own the world's largest nuclear stockpiles. The deal is premised on the proposition that each side ultimately reduce its nuclear arsenal to total 700 missiles, 1,550 warheads and 800 launchers.

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RPT - Biden Admin Extends New Start Treaty Through February 5 - Blinken

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Biden Admin Takes First Step Toward Extending New Start Treaty for 5 Years - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 3 (Sputnik) - The administration of US President Joe Biden has made the first move toward extending the New Start Treaty with Russia for the next five years, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, the United States took the first step toward making good on that pledge when it extended the New START Treaty with the Russian Federation for five years," Blinken said.

"Extending the New START Treaty ensures we have verifiable limits on Russian ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers until February 5, 2026."