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Biden Says Raising US Refugee Admission Cap to 125,000
by [Mary F.](#)

During his presidential campaign, US President Joe Biden pledged to increase the number of refugees who can come to the United States. The former US president Donald Trump administration set a refugee cap of 15,000 for this fiscal year, the lowest number in 41 years. During a speech at the US State Department Thursday, the Biden administration announced that it would be increasing the number of refugees who can come to the United States to 125,000.

"Today, I'm approving an executive order to begin the hard work of restoring our refugee admissions program to help meet the unprecedented global need," Biden said, [CNBC reported](#). "It's going to take time to rebuild what has been so badly damaged."

However, Biden must first consult Congress before setting the annual refugee admissions cap in the 12-month period starting October 1.

The new refugee cap comes after a series of executive actions from Biden Tuesday that aim to steer the US immigration policy in a different direction from Trump's hardline strategy.

Biden on Tuesday signed three executive orders that aim to establish a task force that can reunite families separated at the US-Mexico border, determine root causes of migration from Central America and review the legal immigration system.

"I'm not making new law, I'm eliminating bad policy," Biden said at the White House Tuesday, [the Independent reported](#).

"What I'm doing is taking on the issues that — 99 percent of them — that the president — the last president of the US issued executive orders I felt were very counterproductive to our security, counterproductive to who we are as a country, particularly in — in the area of immigration. This is about how America is safer, stronger, more prosperous when we have a fair, orderly, and humane, and legal immigration system," Biden added.

Biden's pledge to increase the number of refugees has been welcomed by the UNHCR, the UN Refugee agency, [which said](#) that the pledge "reflects authentic humanitarian values and reaffirms US leadership amid global levels of forced displacement unseen since World War II."

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Iran May Reverse Religious Ruling Banning Nukes if Israel, US Act Aggressively - Ex-Diplomat
by [Mary F.](#)

In 2018, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions on Iran. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has stated that the US would

reciprocate Iran's resumed compliance with the nuclear deal but would seek a broader agreement that also covers the country's missile program.

During an interview last month on Lebanese state TV, former Iranian diplomat Amir Mousavi revealed that if Israel or the US take "dangerous" steps, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei may reverse the religious fatwa or ruling that prevents the acquisition, development or use of nuclear weapons.

Under the 2003 fatwa, or nonbinding Islamic legal ruling, nuclear weapons are considered against Islam.

"A fatwa is issued in accordance with developing circumstances. Therefore, I believe that if the Americans and Zionists act in a dangerous manner, the fatwa might be changed," Mousavi said in an interview with the Lebanese al-Mayadeen TV, [the Times of Israel reported](#).

During the interview, Mousavi also claimed that former US president Barack Obama "was forced to sign the nuclear agreement with Iran" after the downing of an American unmanned aerial vehicle by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in 2011 because "he strived to win the Nobel prize."

"Iran is holding some significant cards, which it can use to force President [Joe] Biden to return [to the JCPOA] with no preconditions," noting that "the Iranian leadership is not in a hurry," Mousavi also added, commenting on the revival of the Iran nuclear deal.

"As the Americans delay carrying out their obligations and lifting the sanctions, Iran will further develop its nuclear and defensive capabilities. I believe that the international community is the one that stands to lose and not Iran," Mousavi added.

In a briefing Tuesday, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said the US and Iran are a "long way" from a return to the 2015 nuclear deal.

Price also added that Biden has been "very clear" that "if Iran comes back into full compliance with its obligations under the [deal], the United States would do the same, and then we would then use that as a platform to build a longer and a stronger agreement that also addresses other areas of concern."

In a Tuesday report, the International Atomic Energy Agency revealed that Iran has continued to accelerate its nuclear program in recent weeks by enriching uranium and installing new centrifuges at its underground Natanz plant, [Reuters reported](#). After ex-president Donald Trump unilaterally pulled out the US from the JCPOA and reinstated the sanctions against Iran, the latter announced a phased reduction of its obligations under the deal, abandoning restrictions on nuclear research, centrifuges, and the level of uranium enrichment.

Iranian Foreign Ministry Javad Zarif [said in an interview with CNN](#) on Monday that Iran does not intend to build a nuclear weapon, arguing that if it did, it would have done it "some time ago". He also proposed that EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell could "choreograph" the establishment of the Iran-US dialogue on returning to the nuclear deal.

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US Priest Under Fire for Performing 'Exorcism' on Capitol During Riots
by [Mary F.](#)

Former US president Donald Trump loyalists on January 6 breached the Capitol building in Washington, DC, to protest against the certification of the Electoral College and to challenge the confirmation of Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election.

Reverend David Fulton, a Nebraska priest, is being scrutinized by the Catholic church after being caught on video the day of the Capitol riot saying he was performing an exorcism on the building. An exorcism involves the expulsion of a supposed evil spirit from a person or place. The video of Fulton saying he was performing an exorcism was captured by DC-based independent videographer Eddie Becker.

In a statement to the [Omaha World-Herald](#), Deacon Tim McNeil, the chancellor for the Archdiocese of Omaha, revealed that the incident is an “internal personnel matter” being taken “seriously.”

McNeil also revealed that Omaha Archbishop George Lucas is “very upset” at the priest. “He should not have been there dressed as a priest. It was a misuse of his priestly ministry,” McNeil told the Omaha World Herald.

According to the Washington Post, Fulton read an apology on Sunday at the St. Michael’s Catholic Church but also stated that the video in which he said he performed an exorcism at the church was taken out of “context.”

[In his apology](#), Fulton also revealed that he didn’t perform an exorcism but rather “led others in prayer,” while denying entering the Capitol during the insurrection.

“I used bad judgment in participating in the rally in Washington, DC, on Jan. 6, 2021,” Fulton said. “I spoke and acted in a way that was not consistent with my vocation as a priest. I acknowledge that the confusion and hurt that I caused to you, to the church and to the other members of the community.

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Sen. Mitt Romney Pitches Plan to Scrap TANF Welfare Program, Replace With Direct Cash for Parents

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Democrats, including US President Joe Biden, have been widely criticized for their failure to deliver on a promise for \$2,000 stimulus checks, even as moratoria on evictions and student loans were pushed back. Meanwhile, local aid groups and charities are buckling under the pressure of an increasing client base.

Utah Republican Senator Mitt Romney has pitched a plan that would effectively scrap key welfare programs and replace them with direct cash payments to families based on their number of children. Advocates say it would dramatically simplify the aid process and curb child poverty in the US, but critics on the left are wary of eliminating a major welfare program already underfunded.

Romney’s “Family Security Act” would be included in the \$1.9 trillion stimulus plan the Democrats have proposed but would actually increase payments for children in both volume and time. The [legislation presently provides](#) \$3,600 per year for every child up to the age of 6

and \$3,000 for every child between the ages of 6 and 17; Romney's proposal would increase the checks for children under 6 to \$4,200 a year and would begin four months before birth. Broken down by month, Romney's plan would provide \$350 a month for children under 6 and \$250 a month for children over 6, and those benefits taper off for parents with increasingly high incomes. Also, the Democrats' plan is for one year, whereas Romney envisions his program becoming a permanent feature of US society.

Romney claims his proposal would cut child poverty by one-third, instantly lifting nearly 3 million children out of poverty, including 50% of children in "deep poverty."

"American families are facing greater financial strain, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, and marriage and birth rates are at an all-time low," Romney said in a Thursday [press release](#) announcing the proposal.

"On top of that, we have not comprehensively reformed our family support system in nearly three decades, and our changing economy has left millions of families behind. Now is the time to renew our commitment to families to help them meet the challenges they face as they take on [the] most important work any of us will ever do - raising our society's children. This proposal offers a path toward greater security for America's families by consolidating the many complicated programs to create a monthly cash benefit for them, without adding to the deficit," he said.

'Consolidation' or Cuts?

Those programs include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the primary vehicle of the welfare system created by then-US President Bill Clinton in his 1996 overhaul of "welfare as we know it." The overhaul booted millions from state support programs without [an appreciable impact](#) on poverty or employment rates. It, too, was billed as a cure for low birth rates and unwed mothers.

The program would also eliminate the Earned Income Tax Credit, which provides benefits for low-income and medium-income people, with additional add-ons for families with children and is part of one's income tax filing.

Romney's program would not disperse funds through the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), as has been done with tax credits in the past, but rather through the Social Security Administration, an agency with a long history of handling direct cash payments.

Joshua McCabe, a historian of US welfare policy at Endicott College, told [the Washington Post](#) that the direct cash payments used by the federal government at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic "blew the lid" off any remaining hesitancy to switch to that method of relief instead of tax credits or cuts.

"It naturalized and legitimized it," McCabe said, "this is why we now have Republicans saying this is the best way to fight poverty."

Sharon Parrott, president of the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, [told Vox that](#) slashing EITC would lead to massive cuts, not a consolidation. "Their own document shows an EITC cut of \$47 billion," she said.

"This proposal shows growing bipartisan support for expanding the child tax credit, but it's misguided to undercut the policy's poverty-reducing impact by using deep cuts in other critical forms of support for low-income people to pay for it," Parrott added.

It's deeply ironic, in a way: direct cash payments to the poor have been derided by conservatives in the past as socialism and redistribution of wealth. And indeed, some have

maintained that position, with Angela Rachidi, a scholar at the right-wing American Enterprise Institute, telling the Post that Romney's program would be a "disincentive" for poor parents to seek employment.

It's unclear what kind of effect that argument will have a year into the pandemic, with millions out of work and millions more scraping by with part-time jobs that are unlikely to gain hours anytime soon.

Spiking Child Poverty, Hunger

What is clear is that child poverty, including child hunger, was already on the rise in the US before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and the US government's failure to adequately address the pandemic has caused it to skyrocket.

As [Sputnik has reported](#), the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns have pushed food banks across the US to their limits, many of which are in imminent danger of running out of supplies.

[According to a recent](#) report by Feeding America, the United States' largest hunger-relief organization, one in six Americans, or 50 million people, is hungry, including one child in four. In 2018, there were 37 million hungry people in America. [According to Columbia](#) University's Center on Poverty & Social Policy, in October 2020 the child poverty rate was 19.9%, an increase from 18.7% before the pandemic. However, for Black and Latino families those numbers are higher, at 26.3% and 26.9%, respectively.

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Macron Offers to Be 'Honest Broker' in US-Iran Talks, But Pushes JCPOA Expansion Tehran Rejected

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A US State Department spokesperson on Tuesday dispelled rumors that US President Joe Biden's transition team has been engaged in backroom talks on the US returning to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), saying it was "a long way" from considering Iran's proposal to revive the deal.

French President Emmanuel Macron has once again offered his help in patching up relations between Iran and the United States, suggesting he could be an "honest broker" in talks over returning to the 2015 nuclear deal. However, he also said he wants to expand the deal to include the strongly anti-Iranian countries of Israel and Saudi Arabia.

"I will do whatever I can to support any initiative from the US side to re-engage demanding dialogue and I will be here ... to try to be an honest broker and a committed broker in this dialogue," Macron said during an online forum at [the Atlantic Council](#) think tank on Thursday.

The French president said he believed Iran was "much closer to a nuclear bomb now than they were before" the JCPOA, and that "this is the right timing" to negotiate a wider deal that would include Iran's formidable ballistic missile program as well as other regional partners.

"We have to find a way to involve in this discussion Saudi Arabia and Israel, because they are some of the key partners of the region directly interested by the outcomes with our other friends

of the region,” Macron added. “It is impossible to fix the situation without being sure that all of these countries are comfortable with this new agenda.”

Iran's Position Made Clear

However, Tehran has already spoken out against either revising or expanding the 8-nation JCPOA.

“The JCPOA is a multilateral international agreement that has been endorsed and stabilized by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231. It is by no means renegotiable, and its parties are also definite and unchangeable,” Iranian [Foreign Ministry spokesperson](#) Saeed Khatibzadeh said last week.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad [Zarif noted last week](#) that a mechanism for such an “honest broker” already exists in the JCPOA: EU High Representative Josep Borrell, who is the coordinator of the joint commission that monitors the deal.

Moreover, Macron’s proposed expansion of the deal follows the path previously laid out by the Biden administration, and he [has previously said](#) Iran must be the first to return to the confines of the deal, making it unlikely Tehran will believe Macron’s claim to be an “honest broker.”

Iran, the US, the UK, France, Germany, Russia, China, and the European Union signed the agreement in July 2015, providing for the removal of economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for ending its nuclear weapons program and agreeing to strict limits on the quality and quantity of refined uranium it could produce. However, in 2018, then-US President Donald Trump claimed without evidence that Iran was violating the deal and unilaterally pulled the US out of it, reimposing damaging “maximum pressure” economic sanctions.

After the other JCPOA partners failed or refused to convince Washington to soften its stance, Iran began “reducing commitments” to the deal, as Zarif has put it, refining greater volumes and a higher purity of uranium - albeit not within the limits useful for making an atomic bomb, as [Sputnik has reported](#).

Proposed New Partners Are Hostile to JCPOA

Israel and Saudi Arabia have both condemned the JCPOA as it presently exists.

In December, when it became clear Biden was interested in a nuclear deal with Iran, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said Riyadh and Arab states on the Persian Gulf must be consulted first, and the Israel Defense Force’s [chief of staff denounced](#) the JCPOA last week as “wrong from a strategic point of view.” Just days earlier, Yossi Cohen, the head of Israel’s Mossad intelligence agency, [traveled to Washington](#) to make Israel’s case about JCPOA negotiations directly.

Macron is expected to travel to Riyadh later this month, where he will meet with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in part to discuss their joint position on Iran, according to [Mehr News Agency](#).

Abolfazl Amouei, the [spokesperson for the Iranian](#) Parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, also said last week that “Saudi Arabia has nothing to do with the nuclear agreement.” However, he noted that Tehran is “ready for a dialogue with Saudi Arabia if it so desires, whether bilaterally or with the neighboring Arab countries.”

Indeed, just such a dialogue between the two rival nations appeared to be underway in early January 2020, when Iranian Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani traveled to Baghdad, Iraq, for what he believed were [peace talks with Riyadh](#). Instead, the Quds Force commander was killed by a US

drone strike, prompting an Iranian ballistic missile strike against two air bases in Iraq that housed US troops.

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'We're Challenging Power': YouTube's Indie Media Crackdown Aims to 'Prop Up' Mainstream Channels

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In a widespread crackdown on Wednesday, YouTube demonetized several independent media and analysis channels, providing only the vaguest of explanations as to why. One of the affected analysts told Sputnik the move has come amid a decline in corporate news ratings and rising interest in independent reporting.

On Wednesday, [Sputnik reported](#) that YouTube had demonetized the channel of News2Share, a video journalism outlet that posts unedited footage from events from across the political spectrum. In their vague explanatory email, the Google subsidiary claimed News2Share had "content that focuses on controversial issues and that is harmful to viewers."

Editor-in-chief Ford Fischer noted that in a debate with YouTube about a video that was removed, YouTube claimed his video lacked proper context; however, Fischer maintained it had greater context than many videos of the same event hosted by corporate media outlets on the site. Fischer's video was of the crowd outside the White House as they listened to then-US President Donald Trump speak on January 6, immediately before the assault on the US Capitol by members of that crowd.

By contrast, other videos left unbothered by YouTube only showed Trump speaking and had nondescript titles like "save America rally."

Other channels that were also demonetized included The Convo Couch, Mi Casa es Su Casa, Graham Elwood, and the Progressive Soapbox, the lattermost of which is hosted by Jamarl Thomas, who also co-hosts Fault Lines on Radio Sputnik. In each case, the channel owner received nearly identical messages about "harmful" content sent at the same time: 2:18 pm on February 3, 2021.

Thomas and co-host Shane Stranahan invited on to [Fault Lines on Thursday](#) Bruno Franco, an independent political analyst, commenter and host of Franc Analysis, one of the channels that was demonetized, to talk about the crackdown and its implications for independent media, particularly on the political left.

[Interview begins at 71:50]

Franco said his YouTube channel had been monetized for less than two months before being targeted by the site.

"I first got a warning for a stream that failed. They were saying it was spam, that I was directing people to another website, but it was a stream that failed," Franco explained. "It was just a blank screen and I deleted it immediately. I streamed what I wanted to stream successfully the next day, that video didn't get taken down. And then I appealed that."

However, when YouTube re-examined the video, they said a few days later that several of his videos “violate our terms and conditions and that it’s harmful material. They didn’t tell me how it’s harmful, they didn’t tell me which ones are harmful. I never advocated for violence in any of my videos, if I’m exposing truths that the mainstream media doesn’t want us to talk about, that they don’t talk about, they view that as harmful to their profit motive agenda.”

Franco said it was “very coincidental” that the crackdown has come at the same time as corporate outlets like MSNBC are suffering from “record-low ratings,” causing them to see independent media as a threat.

[Variety reported](#) on Saturday that while CNN, Fox News and MSNBC all saw their primetime viewership spike in the first week of 2021, when the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol occurred, they have continued to decline, with that decline accelerating after the January 20 inauguration. However, the outlet cautioned that the decline could only be temporary, as former US President Donald Trump’s impeachment trial is set to begin next week.

“This was a purge. They sent it to so many channels, the same email,” Franco said, noting he was worried an outright ban could be next.

“This is just a step. I’m not going to say it’s the first step, because they’ve been taking many steps before this, like with [‘Adpocalypse’](#) and then the suppression with [the algorithm](#) and propping up mainstream channels. It’s gonna happen,” he told Sputnik.

“I’m upsetting the right people, the powerful people. So is Jamarl, so is Graham Elwood and the Convo Couch,” Franco said. “They’re all pissing off the powers that be, that want to silence us, that want the American people to be brainwashed into thinking America and its corporations are exceptional and that they’re a force for good and that the only truth that you should know about and that you should accept is the one that the mainstream tells you. Because we challenge that, then they see us as a threat.”

“So we’re doing something right because we’re challenging power and we’re trying to expand consciousness and critical thinking among the people.”

Thomas said it was “massively Orwellian” for YouTube to go after content on independent media that they then turn around and allow on corporate media without reproach, such as the footage of Trump supporter Ashli Babbitt being shot by a Senate security guard during the insurrection. He said that this discretionary decision-making on pruning content proves the social media giants are publishers, not hosting platforms: an important distinction with ramifications on how the much-debated Section 230 of the 1996 Telecommunications Act protects them from liability.

“This should be a wake-up call also for a lot of the independent channels that were calling for censorship,” Franco said. “We’re seeing it now that it hurts the Left more than anything ... This should unify us on the Left more. And we also need to figure out alternative ways to support us, because you know as well as I do that YouTube steals a lot of our money. They pay us pennies while we’re bringing people into their platform so that they can watch their videos that are on there.”

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Treasury Sec Yellen to Meet With Federal Reserve, Regulators to Launch 'Market Integrity' Probe
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The initial small-time buying frenzy aimed at GameStop and several other low-value stocks professional investors commonly bet against has expanded into other markets, including cryptocurrencies and silver, drawing the attention of federal regulators who fear fraud schemes. US federal regulatory agencies, including the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) could soon launch a probe of recent activity on the New York Stock Exchange centered on commonly shorted stocks.

“Secretary Yellen has called a meeting with the SEC, FRB [Federal Reserve Bank], FRBNY [Federal Reserve Bank of New York], and CFTC. Secretary Yellen believes the integrity of markets is important and has asked for a discussion of recent volatility in financial markets and whether recent activities are consistent with investor protection and fair and efficient markets,” Treasury spokesperson Alexandra LaManna told [Fox Business](#) on Wednesday. Yellen is a former chairperson of the Federal Reserve.

The move follows weeks of outcry demanding investigations and regulations in response to upheavals in US stocks caused largely by a group of amateur online investors who organize their purchases of commonly shorted stocks on the subreddit WallStreetBets. However, who should be investigated and regulated changes depending on who is doing the demanding. As Sputnik has reported, those who take the side of the professional hedge funds that have [lost billions betting](#) incorrectly that certain stocks would fall in value are calling for [investigations of WallStreetBets](#) on grounds of market manipulation, while those who take the side of the small-time traders want investigations of brokerage firms and [trading apps like Robinhood](#), which took it upon themselves to block traders from buying stocks in firms like GameStop, AMC, and Nokia.

Some, like Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), progenitor of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, have called for [regulation of both](#).

Last week, [the SEC said](#) it was “closely monitoring and evaluating the extreme price volatility of certain stocks’ trading prices,” but has made no further comment. The agency presently has no permanent chairperson, nor does the CFTC, which has not commented on the affair. However, the CFTC did say on Sunday it was [monitoring the silver market](#), into which some of the buying frenzy has spilled in recent days after investors were blocked from buying certain stocks. Cryptocurrencies like Dogecoin and bitcoin have also benefited from the investment rush, although [as Sputnik reported](#), because they don’t obey the same forces governing their rise and fall in value, such rushes are prone to becoming “pump-and-dump” schemes, which the CFTC investigates on the grounds of fraud.

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Biden Says Myanmar Military Should Relinquish Power, Release Detainees
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Myanmar recently made global headlines after the country's military seized power in a coup d'état and imposed a one-year state of emergency after the top brass alleged general elections were riddled with fraud.

US President Joe Biden called on military officials in Myanmar on Thursday to return power to democratically-elected officials after the armed forces seized control and accused officials of committing election fraud.

"There can be no doubt, in a democracy, force should never seek to overrule the will of the people or attempt to erase the outcome of a credible election," Biden said in his first major foreign policy speech.

"The Burmese [Myanmar] military should relinquish power they have seized, release the advocates, activists and officials they have detained, lift the restrictions on telecommunications, and refrain from violence."

Should Myanmar military officials refuse to fall in line, Biden warned that the US would "impose consequences on those responsible" for preventing the democratic will of the country's people. Additionally, Biden indicated that he has been in "close" contact with American allies, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) to address the Monday coup.

The newly sworn-in president's remarks came two days after the State Department [officially recognized](#) that the Myanmar military's detention of civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint constituted a coup.

The designation prompts the US to curtail its assistance to the Myanmar government; however, humanitarian aid and programs to support civil society will continue.

The Monday coup unfolded a day before the country's parliament was expected to swear-in members elected during the 2020 general election, which saw an overwhelming majority of National League of Democracy candidates beat out the military-backed party.

About 70 recently elected lawmakers defied the new military government on Thursday by convening a symbolic meeting of the Parliament that was prevented from opening. They signed their oaths of office at a government guesthouse in the capital, Naypyitaw, where about 400 of them were detained in the aftermath of the takeover.

Echoing sentiments voiced during the contested US election, the Myanmar military promptly claimed that widespread irregularities on voter lists led to election fraud; however, the allegation was subsequently ruled out after officials determined that there was no evidence to support the claims.

The Myanmar military has since indicated that its action are legally justified since the country's constitution calls for military takeovers during times of emergency. Military officials cite the government's failure to thoroughly investigate the allegations as a reason for its takeover. Both Suu Kyi and the Myanmar president are expected to remain in custody until at least February 15, [NPR reported](#). The pair were detained along with a variety of top government officials. Most recently, [authorities charged](#) Suu Kyi with possessing illegally imported walkie-talkies in a move to give legal grounds for her detainment.

Myanmar was previously under military rule for multiple decades and only within the last 10 years began making progress toward democracy. At present, power of Myanmar has been handed to Min Aung Hlaing, who has served as the commander of the armed forces since 2011.

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Trump May Be Allowed to Live at Mar-a-Lago After Palm Beach Lawyer Offers Backing by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Even before former US President Donald Trump left the White House, he faced an uphill battle in Palm Beach, Florida, after residents living near Mar-a-Lago voiced their discontent over his desire to use the private club as his permanent residence. A past agreement with the city established that Trump would not use the club as a home.

John Randolph, the town attorney for the city of Palm Beach, has sent [a memo](#) to both the town's mayor and council members explaining that the former commander-in-chief should be allowed to live at his so-called "winter White House" permanently.

The memorandum, which was first obtained by the [Washington Post](#), argues that a decades-old agreement between Trump and Palm Beach officials allowing the estate to be converted into a private club does not specifically prevent The Donald from living at the club.

While the 1993 deal allowed for the mansion to be converted into a resort, Trump, in exchange, indicated he would not use the location as a residence, but would instead be a member of the club and be entitled to use the facilities as such. The signed agreement stipulates that guests could not stay at the club for more than a total of 21 days in a year.

Randolph noted that the agreement "did not incorporate a direct prohibition on former President Trump residing at the club, the language in the agreement pertaining only to the members' use of guest suites."

Highlighting the city's zoning codes, which states that employees can live at private clubs, Randolph pinpoints that Trump fits the bill since he serves as the president of Mar-a-Lago LLC, the corporation that owns the club.

The code cited by Randolph defines an employee as "any person generally working onsite for the establishment and includes sole proprietors, partners, limited partners, corporate officers and the like."

As such, Randolph concludes in the memo that Trump is considered a "bona fide employee of the club," underscoring that the zoning regulations "permits him to reside at the club."

Although the argument made by Randolph was first presented by Trump lawyer John Marion in a letter late last month, the town lawyer's stance on the matter marks the first time that a city official has weighed in on the matter.

The Washington Post reported that in Marion's letter, the Trump lawyer also pointed out that the former president does not use a guest suite at the resort, but instead resides in an owner's suite.

City officials are expected to discuss the argument during a February 9 meeting, according to the [Palm Beach Daily News](#). Incidentally, that's the same day that Trump's Senate impeachment trial is due to kick off in Washington, DC.

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US House Strips Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Committee Assignments After Incendiary Remarks

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Introduced by Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), the House resolution sought to specifically remove Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) from the House Education and Labor Committee and the Budget Committee "in light of conduct she has exhibited."

The US House of Representatives voted Thursday to remove the freshman congresswoman from committee assignments after she came under fire for incendiary remarks calling for violence against Democrats.

The vote came down with 230 in favor and 199 against. A total of 11 Republicans crossed the aisle and voted with their Democrat counterparts.

The development came after the US House voted along party lines to overturn Republican efforts to adjourn the Thursday session and prevent the chamber from debating and voting on a resolution calling for the removal of the controversial official.

Amid an earlier debate on the resolution, Wasserman Schultz called Greene's earlier statements on the House floor a "[mild walkback](#)." She noted that Greene's recognition of her ill behavior is "not enough to prevent her future harm."

"Now that she's made her choices, the House must limit the future harm and violence that she can inflict on this body," Wasserman Schultz said.

In recent weeks, Greene fell under the microscope for her history of spreading conspiracy theories and endorsing political violence against Democrats prior to taking office.

In addition to embracing unsubstantiated claims that the 2020 election was "stolen" from former US President Donald Trump, Greene also alleged that the California wildfires were deliberately started by a space laser and questioned whether a plane had in fact struck the Pentagon during the 2001 terrorist attacks, among other claims.

She also claimed that school shootings have been staged and even went as far as [taunting](#) a survivor of the deadly Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida. Ahead of the looming vote, Greene spoke from the House floor and told her fellow lawmakers that her past comments "do not represent me, they do not represent my [congressional] district and they do not represent my values."

"I was allowed to believe things that weren't true, and I would ask questions about them and talk about them. And that is absolutely what I regret," Greene added in an attempt to disavow her beliefs in various QAnon conspiracy theories.

Wearing a mask with the words "Free Speech" adorned on the front, Greene also took the time to accuse the media of distorting her record and for taking her words out of context; however, it's worth noting that while Greene acknowledged her mistakes, she did not apologize for her comments.

The House's efforts came one day after House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R- CA) condemned Greene's past commentary, but opted not to reprimand her. McCarthy [told reporters](#) after a meeting with House Republicans that Greene had "said she was wrong."

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Unshakeable Ghosts - Political Cartoon

Under the Obama and Trump administrations, the US served as firm supporters of the Saudi-led conflict in Yemen, with both presidents offering support in the form of weapons, transportation and intelligence logistics, among other means. Even when the Trump White House faced congressional opposition on the matter, US support never wavered.

US President Joe Biden announced on Thursday the US would no longer provide offensive support in the Saudi-led war in Yemen, a move highlighting a somewhat clear pathway toward distinguishing his administration from those of his predecessors.

However, it's unclear just how much distance the current administration will be putting between itself and those of former US President Barack Obama and Donald Trump when one takes into consideration the individuals filling out Biden's cabinet positions.

In fact, while Biden attempts to wash himself of the US involvement in the Yemen conflict, Avril Haines' appointment as the director of national intelligence is likely to serve as a constant reminder. Under the Obama presidency, Haines played a [central role](#) in crafting the legal framework regarding the administration's controversial drone program.

Incidentally, Haines' track record also includes efforts to cover up the US' infamous torture program, as she [worked to redact](#) much of the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on the CIA's "enhanced interrogation techniques." The New York native also [cleared a panel decision](#) to not reprimand CIA personnel who spied on committee investigators.

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US House Impeachment Managers Request Trump Testify Under Oath for Senate Trial
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Senate impeachment trial is slated to begin February 9. Former US President Donald Trump stands accused of inciting a mob of political supporters who then stormed the US Capitol building on January 6.

Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD), the lead impeachment manager, issued a memo to Trump on Thursday, requesting the former US president "provide testimony under oath, either before or during the Senate impeachment trial" and then present said "testimony (of course including cross-examination) as early as Monday, February 8, 2021, and no later than Thursday, February 11, 2021."

The request comes as a follow-up to Trump's Tuesday filing in which he "denied many factual allegations set forth in the article of impeachment."

"You have thus attempted to put critical facts at issue notwithstanding the clear and overwhelming evidence of your constitutional offense," Raskin wrote.

The letter highlighted that US Presidents Gerald Ford and Bill Clinton both provided testimony while holding office. Furthermore, the 2020 Supreme Court opinion in Trump v. Vance highlighted that neither Article II of the Constitution nor Article VI's Supremacy Clause safeguards a sitting president.

"Indeed whereas a sitting President might raise concerns about distraction from their official duties, that concern is obviously inapplicable here," the lead impeachment manager wrote. "We therefore anticipate your availability to testify."

In the event that Trump declines the invitation, prosecutors "reserve any and all rights, including the right to establish at trial that your refusal to testify supports a strong adverse inference regarding your actions (and inaction) on January 6, 2021."

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Hunter Biden Discusses Addiction Troubles in Memoir Set for April Publication
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Gallery Books, an imprint of publishing house Simon & Schuster, acquired the rights for Hunter Biden's memoir "Beautiful Things," in the fall of 2019. The title refers to an expression the young Biden used after his brother, Beau, was diagnosed with brain cancer.

Hunter, the oldest living child of US President Joe Biden, will have his memoir published on April 6, months after Republicans and much of the Trump team desperately tried to tarnish the commander-in-chief's White House bid with the 51-year-old's troubled past.

The book's release was [announced Thursday](#) by Jennifer Bergstrom, the senior vice president and publisher of the Gallery Books Group. The memoir is expected to delve into the Delaware native's history with substance abuse, family loss and his path to sobriety.

In a brief extract released with the book announcement, Hunter writes that he comes "from a family forged by tragedies and bound by a remarkable, unbreakable love."

Ahead of its April publication, the book was circulated among writers including Stephen King, Bill Clegg, Anne Lamott and Dave Eggers.

In a statement attached to the announcement, King described Hunter's writing as proving that "anybody - even the son of a United States president - can take a ride on the pink horse down nightmare alley." He added, "Biden remembers it all and tells it all with bravery that is both heartbreaking and quite gorgeous."

Financial terms for the memoir, which was written in collaboration with author and journalist Drew Jubera, were not disclosed.

Asked about the book during a Thursday briefing, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki read a statement from the president and first lady Jill Biden to reporters. In it, the statement says the

pair admires "Hunter's strength and courage to talk openly about his addiction so that others might see themselves in his journey."

Incidentally, the book begins with the question, "Where's Hunter?" a popular right-wing catchphrase that was repeatedly voiced by former US President Donald Trump in the lead up to the contested 2020 presidential election. The Trump team pushed the phrase in an attempt to suggest that if voters paid more attention to Hunter's dealings, they would likely not vote for his father.

Aside from Hunter's troubles with substance abuse, his personal life also saw him repeatedly deny that he fathered a child with an Arkansas woman, a move that saw him eventually admit to the fact under [legal pressure](#). Amid the paternity case, Hunter later married a South African filmmaker days after meeting her. The pair later had a son - named after his brother Beau - in March 2020.

However, Hunter's business dealings eventually took the spotlight when Trump and company claimed corruption was afoot when the Biden son served on the board of the Ukrainian gas company Burisma in 2014, when Joe Biden was serving as vice president under the Obama administration. Infamously, Trump's efforts saw him attempt to pressure Ukraine into investigating the Bidens; however, the call led to Trump's first impeachment by the House of Representatives.

Shortly before the 2020 election, Trump's former personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani touched on the Hunter angle again and claimed that he came into possession of a hard drive that was believed to have belonged to Hunter and was left at a computer repair shop in Delaware. The laptop reportedly contained evidence to support the accusation that Biden helped shape American foreign policy in Ukraine in order to benefit his son. The Biden team has repeatedly rejected any and all allegations surrounding quid-pro-quo deals.

Last December, Hunter confirmed that his tax affairs were under investigation by the US Justice Department. Details of the investigation remain unclear at present. It's worth noting that Trump did previously attempt to have the DoJ appoint a special counsel to investigate the matter, but then-Attorney General William Barr [rejected the move](#).

The Thursday book announcement came weeks after Simon & Schuster revealed they would be dropping its deal with Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) after the lawmaker voiced support for the deadly Capitol riot prompted by troves of Trump supporters.

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REVIEW - Biden in First Foreign Policy Speech Vows to Restore US Leadership, Warns Rivals

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in his first foreign policy speech promised to make America a world leader again by taking multilateral approaches to global challenges and countering rising rivals such as China and Russia.

Biden's address comes a couple weeks after taking over for former President Donald Trump, who was often criticized by opponents for marginalizing allies, undermining NATO, and trying to

establish good relations with Russia. The new president clearly tried to contrast his proposed policies to his successor's more unilateral approach.

BIDEN: 'AMERICA'S BACK'

Biden used the words lead or leadership about a dozen times in his speech at the State Department on Thursday, clearly underscoring what he envisions the US role in the world will look like.

"The message I want the world to hear today [is]... America is back. America is back. Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy," Biden said. "That's why we've moved quickly to begin restoring American engagement internationally and earn back our leadership position, to catalyze global action on shared challenges."

The United States, he added, will compete from a position of strength by working with allies and partners. He called for renewing the US role in international institutions, and "reclaiming our credibility and moral authority, much of which has been lost."

In a demonstration of support for the NATO alliance, Biden announced that the US would freeze the withdrawal of troops from Germany that was ordered under the Trump administration.

Last July, the US announced plans to reduce its troops in Germany by around 12,000. Some analysts saw Trump's move as a reprisal for Berlin's failure to allocate 2 percent of its budget to defense purposes as per NATO regulations.

Biden also pointed out his moves to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement and the World Health Organization, as examples of America leading in the face of existential threats. Moreover, he underscored the need for global cooperation in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

MESSAGES TO MOSCOW, BEIJING

Biden vowed to be tougher on Russia than Trump, who was criticized domestically for purportedly kowtowing to Moscow's leaders. Biden said he told President Vladimir Putin that the days of the US "rolling over" in the face of Russian threats is over.

The US president listed a slew of allegations his administration has levied against Russia related to election meddling, hacking, and treatment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny - all of which the Kremlin has refuted.

The United States, he warned, will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia to defend US vital interests.

"American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy," said Biden.

Biden called for taking a multilateral approach when it comes to countering rivals.

"We will be more effective in dealing with Russia when we work in coalition and coordination with other like-minded partners," he said.

The president, however, also said Washington must engage diplomatically with adversaries and competitors where it's in US interests, such as by renewing the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

"That's why, yesterday, the United States and Russia agreed to extend the New START Treaty for five years to preserve the only remaining treaty between our countries safeguarding nuclear stability," Biden said.

Biden characterized China as the United States' "most serious competitor." He vowed "to take on directly the challenges posed to our prosperity, security and democratic values," but reiterated readiness to cooperate "when it is in America's interest to do so."

"We'll confront China's economic abuses; counter its aggressive, coercive action; to push back on China's attack on human rights, intellectual property, and global governance," Biden said. Biden said his administration will work to ensure the rules of international trade are not stacked against the United States.

"If our workers and intellectual property are protected, then there's no country on Earth - not China or any other country on Earth - that can match us," Biden said.

YEMEN PIVOT

Biden said he directed the Pentagon to conduct a "Global Posture Review" to ensure the US military footprint is appropriately aligned with foreign policy and national security priorities. Then, in a reversal of Obama-era policies, Biden announced that the United States is stopping all support for the offensive operations in Yemen.

"We are also stepping up our diplomacy to end the war in Yemen. This war has to end and to underscore our commitment we are ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen including relevant arms sales," Biden said.

Biden also announced that he named veteran diplomat Timothy Lenderking as US special envoy to address the issue.

The envoy will work with US agencies to ensure humanitarian aid is reaching the Yemeni people who are suffering an unendurable devastation, he said.

Biden, at the same time, vowed that the US would defend Saudi Arabia in the face of missile and drone strikes and other threats from Iranian-supplied forces in multiple countries.

Later in the day, the Yemeni Shia Houthi rebels said they welcomed the US decision to stop supporting offensive operations.

OTHER FOREIGN POLICY MATTERS

Biden issued a stern warning to Myanmar's military demanding that they relinquish power they have seized in a recent coup, release "the advocates, activists and officials" they have detained, lift the restrictions on telecommunications, and refrain from violence.

Biden also moved to reinstate the refugee admissions in the United States back at 125,000 for "the first full fiscal year" of his administration. Last October, Trump lowered the cap to 15,000.

The president also conveyed that US foreign policy cannot be separated from domestic policy, vowing to create jobs, boost the middle class and save the economy. He said it is also the reason he signed an executive order strengthening Buy American policies.

Biden did not address the situation in Afghanistan nor US policy towards Iran. Biden, who vowed earlier to return to the nuclear deal with Iran, has said he wants to broaden the pact to cover other outstanding issues including Tehran's missile program and activities across the Middle East.

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State Dept. in Response to Turkish Allegations Says US Had No Role in 2016 Attempted Coup

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The US State Department in response to Turkish allegations said the United States had no role in the attempted coup in the country in 2016. Earlier on Thursday, Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu accused the United States of being the mastermind behind the 2016 failed military coup in Turkey.

"The United States had no involvement in the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey and promptly condemned it. Recent assertions to the contrary made by senior Turkish officials are wholly false," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release on Thursday.

Price said claims of the United States' responsibility for events in Turkey are inconsistent with Turkey's status as a NATO ally and US strategic partner.

The Turkish government has long blamed the US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen and his supporters, whom it refers to as the Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETO). Ankara repeatedly asked Washington to extradite Gulen, but to no avail.

The coup attempt lasted less than two days and left at least 250 people killed and more than 2,000 others injured.

The failed rebellion triggered a succession of purges among Turkish state and military personnel, civil activists, journalists and teachers. Thousands of people were arrested and tens of thousands more were dismissed from work over their alleged ties to FETO. Gulen himself condemned the coup and denied having any role.

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Biden Warns Russia, Halts Troops Move, Invites Migrants in Debut Foreign Policy Speech

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden threatened to raise costs on Russia, ended support for the war in Yemen, put on hold the removal of troops from Germany and invited 125,000 refugees to America in his first major foreign policy speech.

Biden, who arrived on Thursday at the US State Department to deliver much anticipated remarks, declared that America's diplomacy is back and ready to reengage with the world in a reversal of unilateral inclinations of his predecessor Donald Trump.

MESSAGE TO MOSCOW

Biden vowed to be tougher on Russia than former President, who was criticized domestically for purported kowtowing to Moscow's leaders.

"I made it clear to President [Vladimir Putin in a manner very different from my predecessor, that the days the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions, interfering with our elections, cyber attacks, poisoning citizens are over," Biden said referring to the phone conversation he had with the Russian counterpart in late January.

Russia rejects all allegations levied against it by the United States.

"We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people," Biden threatened. He added that the United States will be more effective in dealing with Russia when it works "in coalition and coordination with other like-minded partners."

Biden earlier ordered a comprehensive intelligence review of all adversarial activities Russia is suspected of before taking punitive action.

President's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters on Thursday that a response will come at "a time and a manner of our choosing." He reiterated that it doesn't rule out "being able to work with Russia where it is in our interest to do so." "We can walk and chew gum at the same time," Sullivan said hailing the extension of the New START arms control pact.

In his speech Biden expressed US "deepest" concern over the imprisonment of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny and called for his immediate and unconditional release. On Tuesday, a Moscow court replaced Navalny's suspended fraud sentence with 3.5 years in prison over probation breaches, prompting domestic and international protests. Russia urged US and its allies to respect international laws and not interfere in the country's judicial process. Like Sullivan, Biden praised an agreement to preserve New START for another six years as an example of engaging with US adversaries and competitors diplomatically on matters that advance American security and interests.

BEATI PACIFICI

In a reversal of Obama-era policies Biden announced that the United States is stopping all support for the offensive operations in Yemen, including "relevant arm sales," in a bid to extinguish a protracted devastating war in the Arab country that resulted in the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

"We are also stepping up our diplomacy to end the war in Yemen. This war has to end and to underscore our commitment we are ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen including relevant arms sales," Biden said.

He appointed veteran diplomat Timothy Lenderkin as US special envoy to address the issue. Yemen since 2014 has been engulfed in a conflict between the government forces loyal to President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthis rebels. In 2015, a coalition of neighboring Arab states led by Saudi Arabia launched an offensive to support Hadi. The Houthis continue to maintain control over a vast part in the north of the country, including the capital Sanaa. Biden's administration is currently reviewing its predecessors' decision to designate the Houthis as a terrorist entity.

WITHDRAWAL FREEZE

Biden also announced that the United States is halting any planned removal of forces from Germany pending "a global posture review."

"Defense Secretary [Lloyd] Austin will be leading a global posture review of our forces so that our military footprint is appropriately aligned with our foreign policy and national security priorities... While this review is taking place, we'll be stopping any planned troop withdrawal from Germany," President said.

Last July, the US announced plans to reduce its troops in Germany by some 12,000. Most of soldiers were supposed to return home with the remainder sent further east, closer to Russian borders, as part of an increasingly tense global powers competition. Some analysts saw Trump's move as a reprisal for Berlin's failure to allocate 2 percent of its budget to defense purposes as per NATO regulations.

MYANMAR, ETC.

Biden issued a stern warning to Myanmar's military demanding that they relinquish power they have seized in a recent coup, release "the advocates, activists and officials" they have detained,

lift the restrictions on telecommunications, and refrain from violence. Sullivan said earlier on Thursday that the administration is looking at "specific targeted sanctions" - both on the military and entities they control and use for personal enrichment.

Biden also moved to reinstate the refugee admissions in the United States back at 125,000 for "the first full fiscal year" of his administration. Last October, Trump lowered the cap to 15,000 refugees to be admitted in the country throughout 2021.

Biden characterized China as the United States' "most serious competitor." He vowed "to take on directly the challenges posed to our prosperity, security and democratic values," but reiterated readiness to cooperate "when it is in America's interest to do so."

Biden made no mention of Iran in his speech. Sullivan said that active consultations are underway with US allies to produce a unified front on the matter. Biden vowed earlier to return to the nuclear deal with Iran, abandoned by Trump for the sake of the maximum pressure campaign, but also calls for negotiating a broader agreement that would cover outstanding issues, like Iran's missile program or its belligerent clientele across the Middle East.

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Canada Extends Ban on Large Cruise Ships Until February 2022 - Statement

TORONTO, February 4 (Sputnik) - Canadian Transport Minister Omar Alghabra extended the ban on large cruise ships in Canadian waters until the end of February 2022, the Transport Ministry said in a statement.

"Today, the Minister of Transport, the Honorable Omar Alghabra, announced two new Interim Orders, which prohibit pleasure craft in Canadian Arctic waters and cruise vessels in all Canadian waters until February 28, 2022," the statement said on Thursday.

Cruise ships accommodating more than 100 people are banned from Canadian waters until next February, the statement said. Passenger vessels carrying more than 12 individuals and all leisure craft are prohibited from entering the Canadian Arctic until that date as well.

Canada's previous Transport Minister Marc Garneau had once extended the ban, which was initially introduced on March 13, 2000, on multiple occasions.

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US House Removes Republican Lawmaker From Committees for Pushing Conspiracy Theories

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has removed newly-elected Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Greene from serving on committees after she pushed conspiracy theories about the September 11 attacks, school shootings, and that California's worst wildfire in 2018 was started by Jewish-financed lasers from space, among others.

The House on Thursday voted 230-199 to approve the resolution to remove Greene from serving on House committees.

Greene embraces views of the QAnon movement, which promotes numerous conspiracy theories including claims that former President Donald Trump was battling a network of pedophiles in the Democratic Party and the US establishment at large. However, she recently expressed regret over her past statements promoting these conspiracy theories.

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US Regulators Reviewing Trading Practices to Ensure Investor Protection - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) are reviewing trading practices to ensure investor protection in the stock market, the Treasury Department said in a press release. "The SEC and CFTC are reviewing whether trading practices are consistent with investor protection and fair and efficient markets. Secretary [Janet] Yellen believes it is imperative to uphold the integrity of these markets and ensure investor protection," the release said on Thursday evening.

The SEC has been under pressure by hedge funds and other established Wall Street players to come up with stiffer trading regulations after retail investors on Reddit grouped to buy GameStop and other shares, sent them soaring and caused billions of dollars of losses for the hedge funds.

Yellen met with the heads of the SEC, CFTC, Federal Reserve Board and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York to discuss the recent financial market volatility, the release said.

The regulators believe the core infrastructure of the financial market was resilient during the GameStop frenzy and agreed on the importance of the SEC releasing a study on the events soon, the release added.

Yellen has previously declined to say what preliminary action, if any, she had in mind over the matter, but said insulating the market against crises would be her priority.

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ANALYSIS - New START Extension Can Lead to US-Russian Talks to Limit Hypersonic, Space Weapons

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The agreed extension of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) could provide the opening for negotiations between the United States and Russia on limiting hypersonic, cyber and space weapons, analysts told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, the United States and Russia agreed to extend the New START Treaty for five more years without any renegotiation of its terms. The treaty is now set to expire on February 5, 2026.

The agreement, in effect since 2011, remains the only arms control accord between the United States and Russia. It limits each state's nuclear arsenal to a total of 700 rockets, 1,550 warheads, and 800 launchers.

VITAL STEP

In light of former President Donald Trump's move to exit multiple arms control pacts, Moscow saw renewing New START as an area of mutual understanding with the incoming Biden administration.

The treaty, some experts feel, represents one of the few issues that the US and Russia see eye-to-eye on, especially recently with Biden officials repeatedly threatening Moscow with sanctions over a range of allegations about election meddling and hacking, all of which the Kremlin has refuted.

"Extending the treaty was absolutely essential to allow for progress in any bilateral arms control measures," Five College Peace and World Security Program Director Michael Klare told Sputnik. "It provides the space for US and Russian negotiators to undertake talks on how to address thorny issues like hypersonic missiles and cyberweapons."

However, he warned, other agreements are not likely in the near future.

"I think it is possible for the US and Russia to agree on new arms control measures, but this will first require extensive discussion and negotiations between high-level specialists on how to deal with emerging military technologies, such as hypersonics and autonomous weapons. These will not fit easily into existing arms control framework," he said.

With respect to China, the Biden administration was unlikely to reverse previous Trump's policy and seek to engage China in an arms control agreement too, Klare continued.

Nevertheless, it was important for the United States to engage with China over the same set of issues that it was addressed with Russia, Klare explained.

SPACE OPPORTUNITIES

State University of New York (SUNY) Professor Karl Grossman, a member of the UN-sponsored Commission on Disarmament Education, Conflict Resolution and Peace also welcomed the agreement by Washington and Moscow to extend New START.

"I think the treaty's extension is a very positive sign. What a reverse from the Trump administration's discarding of international treaties - a foundation for peace," he said.

Grossman also emphasized the importance of moving ahead with new negotiations to defuse the growing dangers of conflict in space stemming from a new off-planet arms race.

"I think in terms of new measures in coming years, significant negotiations are needed. I believe that very important work would be on space issues - what with the United States under Trump establishing a US Space Force with the outrageous and extraordinarily dangerous aim of having the US achieve 'dominance' ...of space," he said.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during a phone call discussed the necessity for new arms control deals, Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

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US Welcomes War Crimes Conviction of Ex-Uganda Terror Group Chief Ongwen - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US government welcomes the conviction of former Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) commander Dominic Ongwen by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague for war crimes including torture and child murder, the Department of State spokesman Ned Price said in a statement.

"The United States welcomes the verdict in the case against former LRA commander, Dominic Ongwen for war crimes and crimes against humanity by the ICC," Price said on Thursday. "This is a significant step for justice and accountability for atrocities committed by the LRA."

The United States helped facilitate the voluntary surrender and transfer of Ongwen to the ICC in 2015, the statement noted.

"We hope Ongwen's conviction demonstrates to the people of Uganda that the perpetrators of the crimes committed against them will be held accountable, there will be justice, and the

horrible legacy of the LRA's tactics to perpetuate and prolong violence and abuse will be addressed," Price said.

Ongwen is charged with four war crimes and three crimes against humanity, including allegations of murder and enslavement committed in 2004 in Uganda.

The United States continues to offer a reward of up to \$5 million for information that leads to the arrest, transfer, or conviction of LRA leader Joseph Kony, the statement added.

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Austin Orders All US Military, Civilian Staff to Always Wear Masks on Duty - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has ordered both military and civilian personnel employed by the US armed forces to wear masks at all times when they are on duty to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Today, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin signed a memo that, effective immediately, directs all individuals on military installations and all individuals performing official duties on behalf of the Department from any location other than the individual's home, including outdoor shared spaces, to wear masks," the release said on Thursday.

The Defense Department explained the new directive is in accordance with the most current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines.

"Individuals must wear masks continuously while on military installations except when an individual is alone in an office with floor-to-ceiling walls with a closed door [or] for brief periods of time when eating and drinking while maintaining distancing in accordance with CDC guidelines," the release said.

Individuals must consistently wear a mask that covers the nose and mouth and that comports with all current guidance from the CDC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the release added.

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US Lawmakers Propose \$100Bln US Climate Bank to Leverage Private Investment

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - Private-sector investments in clean energy technology and infrastructure would be accelerated by a US climate bank capitalized with \$100 billion in government funds under legislation introduced by lawmakers in the House of Representatives and Senate.

"A national climate bank or 'Clean Energy and Sustainability Accelerator'... would provide financing to eligible regional, state and local green banks, make investments directly into projects that reduce carbon emissions, support workers and communities negatively impacted

by the climate transition and provide technical assistance for the start up of new green banks around the United States," Senators Edward Markey and Chris Van Hollen, along with Congresswoman Debbie Dingell, said in a joint press release on Thursday.

The lawmakers posited that a \$100 billion non-profit climate bank could leverage \$884 billion in total investments to mitigate climate change over the next decade and create 4 million jobs, the release said.

The lawmakers based the estimate on programs in the US states of Connecticut, New York and Michigan, where each dollar in publicly funded programs leveraged six to 20 times more in private investment, according to the release.

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Ford Shifts Product Lineup to Electric Vehicles With \$29Bln Investment in Next 4 Years

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - Ford plans to invest \$22 billion through 2025 to electrify the company's lineup of cars and trucks plus another \$7 billion to develop autonomous vehicles, CEO Jim Farley said.

"The transformation of Ford is happening and so is our leadership of the EV (electric vehicle) revolution and development of autonomous driving," Farley said in a press release on Thursday. "We're now allocating a combined \$29 billion in capital and tremendous talent to these two areas, and bringing customers high-volume, connected electric SUVs, commercial vans and pickup trucks."

As electric vehicles become primary in Ford's lineup, the company plans to add manufacturing capacity to a network of plants that already make such cars and trucks in the United States, Canada, Mexico and China, Farley said.

The \$22 billion is nearly double what the company had previously committed between now and 2025, Farley added.

In addition, Ford said it plans to introduce the first "E-Transit" commercial van late this year followed by an all-electric F-150 pickup truck in mid 2022.

Electric vehicles will also become fundamental to the Lincoln luxury brand and the Transit commercial lineup, the latter across a variety of body styles and customized interiors, the release said.

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US Stocks Hit Record Highs on Signs of Labor Market Pickup

NEW YORK, February 4 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street rose for a fourth straight day on Thursday, with the S&P500 and tech-heavy Nasdaq indexes hitting record highs, as declines in

US jobless claims suggested the labor market may be recovering from the worst impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, settled up 1.1 percent at 3,871, after hitting a record high at 3,873. The index has gained 4.2 percent since the week began.

Nasdaq, which reflects the performance of tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, finished the session up 1.2 percent at a record high of 13,778.

Week-to-date, Nasdaq has jumped 5.4 percent.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest gauge of the New York Stock Exchange, gained 1.1 percent to close the day at 31,057. The Dow has gained 3.6 percent since Friday's close.

Thursday's rally in stocks came after data showed US weekly jobless claims fell 4 percent last week, after back-to-back declines of 7 percent and 3 percent in the two prior-weeks. The data suggested a mild recovery in a labor market depressed for months by the novel coronavirus pandemic.

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Trump Resigns From Screen Actors Guild, Beats Likely Expulsion

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump quit the Screen Actors Guild on Thursday in response to a vote by the organization's Disciplinary Committee to expel him over accusations he instigated the January 6 Capitol riot by a group of his supporters.

"I write to you today regarding the so-called Disciplinary hearing aimed at revoking my union membership. Who cares!," Trump wrote in a letter to Screen Actors Guild President Gabrielle Carteris on Thursday. "I no longer wish to be associated with your union."

The Guild responded with a two-word statement: "Thank You."

Trump also used the resignation letter for a parting shot at CNN and MSNBC by taking credit for reviving television news during his presidency.

"I've also greatly helped the cable news television business (said to be a dying platform with not much time left until I got involved in politics), and created thousands of jobs at networks such as MSDNC [sic] and Fake News CNN, among many others," Trump wrote.

Then, in a parting shot at the Screen Actors Guild, Trump accused the organization of doing little more than collecting dues and promoting "dangerous un-American policies and ideas."

The union represents about 160,000 film and television actors, radio personalities, recording artists, internet influencers, and others in the entertainment industry.

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Trump Will Not Testify Under Oath at Impeachment Trial - Lawyers

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump will not testify under oath in the Senate impeachment trial set to begin next week, his attorneys Bruce Castor Jr. and David Schoen said in response to a letter from the lead House prosecutor.

"We are in receipt of your latest public relations stunt," the attorneys said in a letter on Thursday. "The use of our Constitution to bring a purported impeachment proceeding is much too serious to try to play games."

Earlier on Thursday, Congressman Jamie Raskin, the lead impeachment manager, invited Trump to provide testimony under oath in the impeachment trial on events related to the Capitol riot on January 6.

The US House of Representatives Articles of Impeachment charge Trump with "inciting insurrection" during a January 6 rally, where he urged supporters to protest lawmakers accepting electoral slates from battleground US states that Trump claims were invalid and cost him election victory.

Opening arguments in the Trump impeachment trial are set to begin on Monday, featuring nine US House Democrats named as impeachment managers.

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US Ready to Cooperate With China When 'In America's Interest to Do So'

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to cooperate with China when such collaboration meets Washington's interests, President Joe Biden said in his first speech on US foreign policy at the State Department.

"We are ready to work with Beijing when it is in America's interest to do so," Biden said on Thursday.

The US president characterized China as being the United States' "most serious competitor." Biden accused China of human right abuses and intellectual property violations, and promised to confront the challenges Beijing poses particularly in the economic arena.

"We will take on directly the challenges posed to our prosperity, security and democratic values," Biden said.

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Biden Says US Will Not Hesitate to Raise Cost on Russia, Defend Vital US Interests

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said his administration will not hesitate to raise costs on Russia for its activities and will defend vital US interests.

"We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people," Biden said on Thursday during his first foreign policy speech.

The Biden administration has repeatedly levied allegations against Russia recently on a range of issues such as election meddling and hacking, all of which Moscow has refuted.

Biden said the United States will be more effective in dealing with Russia when it works in coalition and coordination with other like-minded partners.

The president also called on Russia to release opposition figure Alexey Navalny immediately.

On Tuesday, a Moscow court replaced Navalny's suspended fraud sentence with 3.5 years in prison over probation breaches, prompting a few Western states to demand his release. Russia urged them to respect international laws and not interfere in the country's judicial process.

Biden also highlighted the United States and Russia's agreement to preserve the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), saying that it is an example of engaging with US adversaries and competitors diplomatically on matters that advance US security and interests.

On Wednesday, Moscow and Washington exchanged official notes on the extension of New START for another five years with no revisions. The treaty is now set to expire on February 5, 2026.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) -

BIDEN SPEECH ON US FOREIGN POLICY

* President Joe Biden on Thursday said he will deliver his first speech on US foreign policy priorities, pointing out that the speech is meant to signal to the world that "America is back, diplomacy is back."

- * The United States is stopping all support for the offensive operations in Yemen, but will continue to defend Saudi Arabia against other threats, Biden said.
- * The Biden administration will not hesitate to raise costs on Russia for its activities and will defend vital United States interests, the US president said.
- * The United States is halting any planned removal of US forces from Germany, Biden said.
- * Myanmar's military should relinquish the power it seized by conducting a coup, release all detainees and lift restrictions on telecommunications, Biden said.
- * The US government is raising the refugee admissions cap back to 125,000, Biden said.

BLINKEN-LAVROV TALKS

- * US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed over the telephone the necessity for concluding new arms control deals, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.
- * Blinken raised the US allegations related to computer hacks, election meddling and the treatment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, Price said.
- * Lavrov reminded Blinken of the need to respect Russian laws with regard to the Navalny case, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * Blinken told Lavrov that Washington was ready to organize an expert dialogue to eliminate the accumulated difficulties in the work of the Russian and US diplomatic missions, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

MYANMAR DEVELOPMENTS

- * The UN Security Council issued a statement on Thursday in which it expressed grave concern over the military coup in Myanmar and called for an immediate release of the detained senior government officials.
- * The US administration may impose targeted sanctions on Myanmar's military and entities they control following a coup in the country, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters.
- * The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is concerned about the effect of the military coup in Myanmar and will follow the guidance of its member states on the issue of recognizing the country's government, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters.

IRAN-RUSSIA TALKS

- * The speaker of the Iranian parliament (Majlis), Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, will pay a visit to Russia next week to discuss security issues, Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali said on Thursday.
- * A delegation, headed by Iranian deputy health minister, will pay a visit to the Russian capital of Moscow next week, Jalali said.

NAVALNY CASE

- * Alexey Navalny will be brought to the Moscow Court on Friday for a hearing in the defamation case in which he is a defendant, the Court's press service said.
- * EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell may meet with Navalny, who is currently detained, but only if the Moscow Court allows such a meeting, Court spokeswoman Uliana Solopova said.

* The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has accepted Navalny complaint over the lack of investigation into his alleged poisoning, the court said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* Russia's research center Vector has completed trials of the EpiVacCorona vaccine and it shows good results, Tatyana Nepomnyaschikh, a Vector staffer who is in charge of international cooperation, said on Thursday.

* EpiVacCorona is expected to provide immunity from the disease for one year, Nepomnyaschikh said.

* The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is launching a plan to help vaccinate 500 million people who might be affected by inequality in coronavirus vaccine distribution, IFRC Secretary General Jagan Chapagain said.

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US to Raise Refugee Admissions Cap to 125,000 - Biden

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced on Thursday that his administration is raising the refugee admissions cap back to 125,000.

"Today, I am approving an Executive Order to begin the hard work of restoring our refugee admissions program to help meet the unprecedented global need," Biden said. "This Executive Order will position us to be able to raise the refugee admissions back up to 125,000 persons for the first full fiscal year of the Biden-Harris administration."

Biden also said he was directing the State Department to consult with Congress on making a down payment to deliver on the promise "as soon as possible."

In October 2020, the previous administration of President Donald Trump announced its decision to lower the cap to 15,000 refugees to be accepted into the United States throughout 2021.

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Biden Announces US Stopping Any Planned Troop Withdrawals From Germany

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced on Thursday that the United States is halting any planned removal of forces from Germany.

"Defense Secretary [Lloyd] Austin will be leading a global posture review of our forces so that our military footprint is appropriately aligned with our foreign policy and national security priorities... While this review is taking place, we'll be stopping any planned troop withdrawal from Germany," Biden said during his first foreign policy speech.

Last July, the US government confirmed plans to reduce its forces from Germany by some 12,000 troops. Most of those withdrawn were supposed to return to the United States and the remainder redeployed further east.

Some analysts saw the Trump administration move as being in response to Berlin failing to allocate 2 percent of its budget for defense as per NATO regulations.

The US military presence in Germany began near the end of WWII amid growing tensions with the Soviet Union. The number of troops stationed in Germany had fallen between 2006 and 2018 from just over 72,000 to about 33,000, according to government figures cited by DW. German officials have warned that a US troop withdrawal would hurt the NATO alliance.

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UPDATE: Biden Says US Ending All Support for Offensive Operation in Yemen

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the United States is stopping all support for the offensive operations in Yemen, but will continue to defend Saudi Arabia against other threats.

"We are also stepping up our diplomacy to end the war in Yemen," Biden said during his first foreign policy speech. "This war has to end and to underscore our commitment we are ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen including relevant arms sales."

Biden, however, also said the United States would support Saudi Arabia to defend its "its sovereignty and its territorial integrity" as it faces missile and drone attacks and other threats from Iranian-supplied forces in multiple countries.

Earlier in the day, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said President Joe Biden would announce an end to the United States' support for offensive operations in Yemen.

Last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Saudi Arabia has contributed to the worst and ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthi rebels since 2014. A coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia launched an operation to support the internationally recognized Hadi government in 2015. The Houthis continue to maintain control over a vast part in the north of the country, including the capital Sanaa.

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New US Bill Would Sanction, Cut Foreign Aid for Abuses on Journalists - Congressman

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - A proposed new bill would impose targeted sanctions, restrict foreign aid and encourage improved reporting on human rights abuses committed against journalists, Congressman Adam Schiff said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, Representative Adam Schiff introduced the Jamal Khashoggi Press Freedom Accountability Act to ensure that the United States holds accountable those who commit extrajudicial killings and other gross violations of human rights against journalists," the release said.

The proposed bill would bar US foreign assistance to government entities and levy targeted sanctions against individuals who had carried out human rights violations against journalists. It would also require the Department of State to document online harassment and electronic surveillance of journalists in its Human Rights Reports, the release said.

"A free and independent media is essential for a free society, and the United States must stand with journalists around the world who risk their lives to expose corruption, express independent and critical voices, and tell the difficult stories that must be told," Schiff said in the release.

Sixteen other members of Congress, all Democrats, co-sponsored the legislation and it is also supported by Reporters Without Borders, PEN America, the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), Freedom House, and the Committee to Protect Journalists, Schiff's release said.

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Biden Says US Ending All Support for Offensive Operation in Yemen

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Biden Says Myanmar Military Should Relinquish Power, Release Detainees

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that Myanmar's military should relinquish power it seized, release all detainees and lift restrictions on telecommunications.

"The Burmese [Myanmar] military should relinquish power they have seized, release the advocates, activists and officials they have detained, lift the restrictions on telecommunications, and refrain from violence," Biden said in his first major foreign policy speech.

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Biden Says US Will Not Hesitate to Raise Cost on Russia, Defend Vital US Interests

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Thursday said his administration will not hesitate to raise costs on Russia for its activities and will defend vital US interests.

"We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people," Biden said in his first foreign policy speech.

The Biden administration has repeatedly levied allegations against Russia recently on a range of issues such as election meddling and hacking, all of which Moscow has refuted.

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UN Chief 'Notes Milestone' ICC Conviction of Ugandan Rebel Commander Guilty of War Crimes

UNITED NATIONS, February 4 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres took note of the "milestone" decision taken by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to find the infamous commander of an African rebel group Dominic Ongwen guilty of crimes against humanity. Earlier on Thursday, the ICC ruled that Ongwen, Uganda's commander of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) guerrilla group, guilty of committing over 60 war crimes and crimes against humanity that included murder, intentional attacks against civilians, rape, enslavement and forced marriage, among many others, that took place in Northern Uganda in 2002-2005. "The Secretary-General takes note of the judgment issued today by the International ICC against Dominic Ongwen, a commander of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)," Dujarric said. "The judgment is a significant milestone in accountability and a step forward in efforts to bring justice to the victims of LRA crimes, and reaffirms that impunity will not be tolerated." Guterres stressed that the court's decision marks the first time a criminal case involving forced marriage has been heard at the ICC.

"It highlights the critical need to eradicate sexual and gender-based violence," Guterres said. Ongwen, who was abducted by the LRA group to be a child militant and then rose to the high-ranking position, was arrested and placed in ICC detention in early 2015, ten years after the court issued an arrest warrant for his capture. The trial on his case lasted from December 2016 to March 2020.

The LRA is a rebel group founded in 1987 in Northern Uganda against the government of incumbent President Yoweri Museveni. The organization later expanded its activities to the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and the Central African Republic. The group, previously included on the US' list of terrorist organizations, is notorious for its brutal deeds, including murder, child-sex slavery, torture, child abduction and others.

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Toxic Heavy Metals Contaminate US Commercial Baby Food - Congressional Report

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - Heavy metals including arsenic, lead, cadmium and mercury found in brand-name US baby foods threaten American infants with neurological damage, including decreased intelligence, a House Oversight subcommittee report said on Monday.

"The Subcommittee's investigation revealed that manufacturers knowingly sell tainted baby food to unsuspecting parents, in spite of internal company test results showing high levels of toxic heavy metal, and without any warning labels whatsoever," House Oversight Subcommittee on

Economic and Consumer Policy Chair Raja Krishnamoorthi said in a statement accompanying the report.

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have declared the four common heavy metals, dangerous to human health, "particularly to babies and children, who are most vulnerable to their neurotoxic effects. Even low levels of exposure can cause serious and often irreversible damage to brain development," the report said.

The subcommittee based its report on internal documents from four of the seven biggest US baby food manufacturers – Nurture, Beech-Nut, Hain, and Gerber - which voluntarily submitted data in response to a subcommittee request that was prompted by reports of contamination that surfaced late last year. Walmart, Campbell, and Sprout Organic Foods declined to cooperate with the investigation, the report said.

As a baseline, the report used heavy-metal concentration limits for bottled drinking water set by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): 10 parts per billion (ppb) of arsenic, 5 ppb for lead and cadmium and 2 ppb for mercury.

"Nurture (HappyBABY) sold baby foods after tests showed they contained as much as 180 parts per billion (ppb) inorganic arsenic [and] Hain (Earth's Best Organic) sold finished baby food products containing as much as 129 ppb inorganic arsenic," the report said.

The report was limited to measurements of baby food ingredients – not finished products on store shelves – for Beech-Nut and Gerber, presumably because companies are only required to test ingredients.

"Beech-Nut used ingredients after they tested as high as 913.4 ppb arsenic [and] Gerber used high-arsenic ingredients, using 67 batches of rice flour that had tested over 90 ppb inorganic arsenic," the report said.

The report contained similar data from the four companies for lead, arsenic and mercury from the four companies.

Recommendations in the report included requiring baby food manufacturers to test finished products and report heavy metal levels on food labels.

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US Voting Company Sues Fox, Giuliani for \$2.7Bln Over Election Fraud Claims - Complaint

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US election technology and software company Smartmatic filed a lawsuit against the Fox News network, attorneys Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell, among others, for \$2.7 billion over their false claims that the company engaged in a fraud scheme to prevent former President Donald Trump from winning the 2020 presidential election, the complaint revealed on Thursday.

"Smartmatic brings sixteen (16) claims against Defendants for defamation and disparagement. Smartmatic seeks to recover in excess of \$2.7 billion for the economic and noneconomic damage caused by Defendants' disinformation campaign as well as punitive damages," the complaint said.

Smartmatic also seeks an order requiring the defendants to retract their false statements, the complaint said.

The complaint said the defendants falsely claimed that Smartmatic was a Venezuelan company under the control of corrupt dictators in socialist countries and was responsible for stealing the 2020 election by altering votes to aid then Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden. Smartmatic employees received hate mail and death threats, and the company's reputation was damaged, the complaint said.

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Blinken in Call With Lavrov Discussed Need for New Arms Control Agreements - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during a phone call discussed the necessity for new arms control deals, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken and Minister Lavrov discussed the New START [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] extension and the need for new arms control that addresses all of Russia's nuclear weapons and the growing threat from China," Price said in a statement after the call.

Blinken, he added, also raised allegations related to hacks, election meddling, and the treatment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny - accusations which Russian officials have vigorously denied. Biden reiterated US resolve to protect its citizens and act firmly in response to Russian actions, according to Price.

The US top diplomat also called for the release of Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed so that they are able to return home to their families in the United States, the spokesperson said.

On Wednesday, Moscow and Washington exchanged official notes on the extension of New START for another five years with no revisions. The treaty is now set to expire on February 5, 2026.

New START has been in force since 2011 and was due to expire on February 5 before the extension. It is the only remaining legally binding agreement on 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 reduces its nuclear arsenal to a total of 700 missiles, 1,550 warheads and 800 launchers.

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Biden Says Will Send Message in Upcoming Foreign Policy Speech That 'America is Back'

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that we will give a speech later in the day on his administration's foreign policy agenda and signal to the world that the United States and diplomacy are back.

"Later today, I'm going to go up to the eight floor [of State Department] and send a clear message to the world: America is back, America is back, diplomacy is back," Biden said. Biden said his administration will rebuild alliances and re-engage in global affairs, including in the response to the novel coronavirus pandemic as well as climate change. Biden will deliver the speech on his administration's foreign policy agenda later on Thursday where he is expected to make several announcements such as placing a freeze on US troop redeployments in Germany and a halt of US support for offensive operations in Yemen.

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UN Calls for OHCHR Mission to Xinjiang Camps to Go Forward Amid Reports of Rape

UNITED NATIONS, February 4 (Sputnik) - UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric in a press briefing on Thursday called for a visit of High Commissioner's for Human Rights to the Muslim-majority Chinese region of Xinjiang, following a report by BBC alleging systematic rape in so-called re-education camps.

On Wednesday, BBC reported, citing interviews with former detainees and a guard, that Muslim Uighur women in such camps are systematically subjected to rape, torture and sexual abuse. "Taking into account the nature of the allegations in the report and the denial by the authorities of these allegations, I think it's more important now than ever for the proposed mission of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to go forward," Dujarric said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Wang Wenbin rejected the reports stating that "re-education centers" strictly observe the constitution and laws, ensuring the fundamental rights of those who are there, and that violence and ill-treatment are prohibited.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet first asked for access to the Xinjiang region to conduct a fact-finding mission in 2018.

Beijing said it would welcome the UN mission, given that it will not interfere in the country's internal affairs.

Western nations, organizations and media outlets have long accused China of arbitrary imprisonment and torture, among other abuses of the local people groups, separate from the dominant Han ethnicity of China.

The United Nation's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2018 published a report saying that over one million people were held in those re-education camps against their will. Widespread reports indicated that around two million people were interned in newly built compounds across the autonomous region by 2020.

The US designated China's actions in Xinjiang a genocide in the last weeks of the tenure of then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Beijing denies all the charges and maintains the camps serve to de-radicalize locals from Islamic extremism, separatism and terrorism.

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Blinken in Call With Lavrov Raised Navalny, Hacking Allegations - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a call with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov raised allegations related to hacks, election meddling, and the treatment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"The Secretary raised Russian interference in the 2020 United States election, its military aggression in Ukraine and Georgia, the poisoning of Aleksey Navalny, and the SolarWinds incident, among other issues," Price said in a statement.

Russian officials have vigorously denied each of the allegations.

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US House Impeachment Managers Seek Trump Testimony Under Oath - Congressman

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Jamie Raskin, the senior House of Representatives manager in the upcoming Senate impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump, sent a letter to Trump inviting him to testify under oath.

"I write to invite you to provide testimony under oath, either before or during the Senate impeachment trial, concerning your conduct on January 6, 2021," Raskin wrote.

Raskin said Trump should provide testimony, including under cross examination, prior to the trial's or testify during the trial itself next week.

The House Articles of Impeachment charge Trump with "inciting insurrection" during a January 6 rally, where he urged supporters to protest lawmakers accepting electoral slates from battleground US states that Trump claims were invalid and cost him election victory.

While Trump called on his supporters during the rally to protest "peacefully and patriotically," a group of supporters subsequently entered the US Capitol. Three people were confirmed dead during the unrest, including a police officer and an Air Force veteran and Trump supporter who was shot by police.

Raskin's letter depicted the request for Trump's testimony as an "invitation" and indicated that the consequences of refusing to testify would be limited to a "strong adverse inference" regarding his role in the November 6 riot.

Raskin leads a team nine House of Representatives lawmakers who will serve as prosecutors in the trial.

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Blinken in Call With Lavrov Discussed Need for New Arms Control Agreements - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during a phone call discussed the necessity for new arms control deals, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken and Minister Lavrov discussed the New START extension and the need for new arms control that addresses all of Russia's nuclear weapons and the growing threat from China," Price said in a statement after the call.

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Canada Expects Moderna to Underdeliver on Vaccine Doses Week of February 22 - Official

TORONTO, February 4 (Sputnik) - Moderna will not deliver the full shipment of 249,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses the week of February 22 that was promised to Ottawa, Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin, Canada's vaccine distribution czar, said on Thursday.

"As for [the week of] February 22... the quantities that we expect to receive remain to be confirmed," Fortin told reporters "We do not expect to receive 249,000 at this time."

Moderna has not offered an explanation for the downsized shipment, Fortin added.

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

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

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Blinken Expresses Concern to Ethiopian Prime Minister Over Tigray Crisis - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke over the telephone with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and raised the United States' "grave concern" regarding the humanitarian crisis in the Tigray region, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken expressed our grave concern about the humanitarian crisis in the Tigray region and urged immediate, full, and unhindered humanitarian access to prevent further loss of life," the readout said.

Blinken also reaffirmed the United States' commitment to Ethiopia's reform agenda and its support for the upcoming national election as well as regional peace and security, the readout added.

Ethiopia's northernmost region of Tigray has been volatile since early November, when the federal government accused the Tigray People's Liberation Front party of attacking a local military base and launched a security operation.

On November 29, the Ethiopian government and the United Nations struck a deal to open Tigray for relief supplies for refugees displaced by recent fighting. The United Nations estimates that more than 58,000 have escaped the country to nearby Sudan since November.

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US Trade Court Upholds Trump National Security Tariffs on Steel Imports - Ruling

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) -The US Court of International Trade ruled on Thursday to uphold former President Donald Trump's national security tariffs on steel imports.

"We have no authority to review the President's discretionary choice among conditions or contingencies that might terminate import restrictions," the US judges said in a ruling.

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UN Will Welcome US Ending Support to Saudi-led Offensive in Yemen - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 4 (Sputnik) - The United Nations will welcome a move by the United States to end support for the Saudi-led military offensive in Yemen, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said President Joe Biden would announce an end to the United States' support for offensive operations in Yemen.

"I have not seen the exact wording of the announcement, but... any move that reduces the number of weapons and military activity is to be welcomed and will give more hope to the people of Yemen," Dujarric said.

Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthi rebels since 2014. A coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia launched an operation to support the internationally recognized Hadi government in 2015. The Houthis continue to maintain control over a vast part in the north of the country, including the capital Sanaa.

Last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Saudi Arabia has contributed to the worst and ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

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Former Texas Oil Company Executive Jailed for Embezzling Over \$2Mln - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US authorities have jailed a former oil services company executive for embezzling more than \$2 million from his firm, the Department of Justice announced in a news release on Thursday.

"A 46-year-old Katy man has been ordered to federal prison after he admitted to embezzling over \$2 million from a local oil services company," the release said. "Robert Andrew Bishop pleaded guilty [on] October 14, 2020."

On Thursday, US District Judge Keith Ellison ordered Bishop to serve a 41-month sentence to be followed by two years of supervised release, the release said.

Bishop was the vice president of resource management at International Professional Management (IPM), an oil services company located in Houston, the release also said.

"As part of his duties, he [Bishop] was in charge of securing short term loans ...he admitted he would inflate the loan amount needed and then divert the excess money to fake vendor accounts," the release added.

Over six years, Bishop diverted roughly \$2.1 million from the company's operating expenses. The owners of IPM discovered his fraud scheme in August 2019, according to the release.

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Biden to Announce End of US Support for Offensive Operations in Yemen - White House

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce later on Thursday an end to then United States' support for offensive operations in Yemen, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters on Thursday.

"Today, he will announce an end to American support for offensive operations in Yemen," Sullivan said.

Sullivan said the decision does not extend to actions against al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (a terrorist group banned in Russia).

The decision, he added, extends to offensive operations that have perpetuated a civil war in Yemen and led to a humanitarian crisis. The types of examples of that include two arms sales of precision guided munitions that the president halted that were moving forward at the end of the previous administration.

Sullivan said Washington has spoken with senior officials in both the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

"We have consulted with them. We are pursuing a policy of no surprises when it comes to these types of actions," he said. "So they understand that this is happening and they understand our reasoning and rational for it."

Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthi rebels since 2014. A coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia launched an operation to support the internationally recognized Hadi government in 2015. The Houthis continue to maintain control over a vast part in the north of the country, including the capital Sanaa.

Last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Saudi Arabia has contributed to the worst and ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

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

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US Actively Negotiating 'Unified Front' With Europe on Iran - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is in active consultations with major European countries on the issue of the Iran nuclear program and expects a unified front to deal with the matter, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters on Thursday.

"We are actively engaged with the European Union right now, particularly the three members of the P5+1 - Germany, the UK and France. We are talking to them at various levels of our government. Those consultations, I think, will produce a unified front when it comes to our strategy towards Iran and towards dealing with diplomacy around the nuclear file," Sullivan said during a White House briefing.

US President Joe Biden has vowed to return the United States to the nuclear agreement with Iran, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, Biden also calls for negotiating a broader agreement with Iran that would cover outstanding issues, like Iran's missile program or its belligerent clientele across the Middle East.

Former President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA in 2018, calling it the worst agreement in US history, and introduced a maximum pressure campaign against Iran.

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US Looking at Targeted Sanctions Against Myanmar's Military - White House Security Adviser

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The US administration may impose targeted sanctions on Myanmar's military and entities they control following a coup in the country, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters on Thursday.

"We are also looking at specific targeted sanctions - both on individuals and on entities controlled by the military that enrich the military. So we believe we have plenty of space to be

able to find the types of sanctions targets necessary to sharpen the choice for the Burmese [Myanmar's] military," Sullivan said during a White House briefing.

On Monday, Myanmar's military launched a coup and detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other senior members of the National League for Democracy (NLD).

The military announced a one-year state of emergency in the country, vowing to take action against alleged voter fraud during the November 8 general election, which the NLD party won.

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Democrats Urge Biden to Cancel \$50,000 Per Student Loan Debt by Executive Action - Schumer

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US Senate and House Democrats have unveiled a resolution urging President Joe Biden to cancel up to \$50,000 in student debt for each borrower, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told a Capitol Hill press conference on Thursday.

"President Biden has taken some good steps but we think he has to go much further," Schumer said. "Senator [Elizabeth] Warren and I believe the American people are strongly behind us on this issue.... If we push this is going to happen. The easiest way is [for] President Biden by the flick of a pen to get it done."

Nearly one in seven of all Americans carries student loan debt and the numbers continued to rise, Congresswoman Ilan Omar told the news conference.

"Nearly 45 million Americans are shackled with student loan debt and the average amount each carries continues to rise. It is the result of a broken system. ...It is a two tiered system - one for the rich and the other for the poor and the middle class. America does not suffer from scarcity, we suffer from greed," Omar said.

Senator Elizabeth Warren said canceling the student loan debt burden, which now stands at \$1.7 trillion, would boost the US economy by freeing young people to start new businesses, buy new homes and put more money in the pockets of young people who are starting their lives.

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Biden to Announce Freeze to US Troop Redeployments From Germany on Thursday

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will announce later on Thursday a freeze in the redeployment of US forces from Germany, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters.

"Today, he will announce that Secretary Austin will lead a global force posture review and during the pendency of that review will freeze any troops redeployments from Germany," Sullivan said.

On Wednesday, European Command (EUCOM) chief Gen. Tod Walters told reporters that the Biden administration is currently reviewing former President Donald Trump's order to withdraw US troops from Germany.

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 being in response to Berlin failing to allocate 2 percent of its budget for defense as per NATO regulations.

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Sullivan Confirms Biden Plans to Appointing Special Envoy for Yemen

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will appoint a special envoy for Yemen as part of a fresh bid to end the conflict in that country, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters on Thursday.

"Yes, he will," Sullivan said when asked during a White House briefing to confirm media reports about the alleged upcoming announcement.

According to the Wall Street Journal, Biden has picked for the job Timothy Lenderkin, a career diplomat with long experience in Yemen - and Gulf - affairs.

Sullivan also said that the new policy on Yemen includes a freeze of US support for any offensive operations.

Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthi rebels since 2014. The United Nations considers the situation in Yemen to be the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with more than 80 percent of the population, or 24.1 million people, in need of assistance.

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US Charges 3 Brokers With Defrauding 17,000 Investors in \$1.7Bln Ponzi Scheme - Regulator

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - Three US investment managers face charges over a \$1.7 billion Ponzi scheme that promised 8 percent annual returns, but ended up shortchanging 17,000 investors, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said on Thursday.

"As alleged in our complaint, the defendants told investors that they would be paid distributions from profits of the portfolio companies when, in reality, many of the payments were being made from the investors' own funds," SEC Regional Director for New York Richard Best said in a press release.

The complaint filed in federal court in the state of New York charges that GPB Capital used investor money to pay portions of the annualized 8 percent distribution payments to more than 17,000 retail investors, the release said, adding that the fraud was valued at \$1.7 billion.

The complaint names GPB Capital owner David Gentile, the owner of an affiliated company Jeffrey Schneider, and former GPB Managing Partner Jeffrey Lash as principals in the Ponzi-like scheme, the release noted.

The SEC said it is seeking disgorgement of ill-gotten gains plus interest and penalties.

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US Under Biden to Pursue 'Firm, More Effective' Policies on Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The Joe Biden administration believes it can pursue a firmer and more effective line against Russia imposing costs and consequences that would deter it, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters on Thursday.

"Unlike the previous administration, we will be taking steps to hold Russia accountable for the range of malign activities that it has undertaken. That includes interfering in America's democracy, it includes the poisoning of citizens on European soil with chemical weapons, it includes the types of hacks and breaches that you have just referred to and many other things as well," Sullivan said during a White House briefing.

Russia has repeatedly denied all the allegations.

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UN Security Council Asks Guterres to Deploy Ceasefire Monitors to Libya - Letter

UNITED NATIONS, February 4 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council requested the UN Secretary-General to swiftly set up and deploy a team to Libya to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire, a draft letter by the council's president, obtained by Sputnik, said on Thursday.

On December 31, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sent a letter to the Security Council in which he proposed establishing a ceasefire monitoring mechanism within the UN Support Mission in Libya.

"The members of the Security Council request that you establish and deploy an advance team swiftly to Libya (security conditions and COVID-19 requirements permitting) as you propose in your interim report," the letter said.

In the letter, the Security Council said it expects no later than in 45 days the advance team to report on the preparations and practical proposals undertaken to deploy the mechanism, following coordination with the 5+5 Joint Military Commission.

According to the letter sent by Guterres in December, the international monitoring team will include civilians, former and serving soldiers and police, and will report to the Joint Military Commission, responsible for managing and overseeing the ceasefire.

On October 23, Libya's warring parties - the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) - signed a nationwide ceasefire agreement during the United Nations-facilitated commission talks in Geneva.

Libya has been split between two rival administrations since its longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown and murdered in 2011. The western part of the country is controlled by the GNA, while the eastern part is controlled by the LNA, headed by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar.

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UN Rights Experts Urge US to End Use of Private Migrant Detention Centers - OHCHR

UNITED NATIONS, February 4 (Sputnik) - The UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries called on the administration of President Joe Biden to end the reliance on for-profit migrant detention centers, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said in a statement on Thursday.

The group of experts welcomed Biden's decision to stop using privately run federal prisons, but stated that given the multitude of incarceration in the United States, it would benefit only "the very small percentage of federal prisoners," excluding vulnerable migrants.

"The experts urged the US government to "eliminate all for-profit detention facilities," saying that "detainees should not become units for profit," the statement said.

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Biden to Announce Freeze to US Troop Redeployments From Germany on Thursday

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Biden to Announce End of US Support for Offensive Operations in Yemen - White House

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

A coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia launched an operation to support the internationally recognized Hadi government in 2015. The Houthis continue to maintain control over the vast part in the north of the country, including the capital Sanaa.

Last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Saudi Arabia has contributed to the worst and ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

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

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AstraZeneca Could Deliver Vaccine to Canada Before End of March if Approved - Minister

TORONTO, February 4 (Sputnik) - The British biopharmaceutical company AstraZeneca could begin delivering coronavirus vaccines to Canada before the end of March if regulatory approval is granted, Procurement Minister Anita Anand said on Thursday.

"Should the [AstraZeneca] vaccine be authorized, deliveries could begin arriving before the end of March," Anand told the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology.

Anand also said AstraZeneca's vaccine is close to receiving regulatory approval by Health Canada.

The vaccine would be made available to Canada through the COVAX facility - the initiative co-led by the World Health Organization, the Gavi vaccine alliance and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations intended to ensure equitable distribution of vaccines among nations who may have less access to vaccines.

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

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UN Security Council Express 'Deep Concern' Over Coup in Myanmar - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, February 4 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council issued a statement on Thursday in which it expressed grave concern over the military coup in Myanmar and called for an immediate release of the detained senior government officials.

"The members of the Security Council expressed deep concern at the declaration of the state of emergency imposed in Myanmar by the military on 1 February and the arbitrary detention of the Government, including State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint and others," the statement said. "They called for the immediate release of all those detained."

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IMF Concerned About Impact of Military Coup in Myanmar - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is concerned about the effect of the military coup in Myanmar and will follow the guidance of its member states on the issue of recognizing the country's government, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"We are very concerned about the impact of recent events on the people of Myanmar. We are watching it very closely," Rice said during press briefing.

The IMF approved emergency assistance of \$356.5 million to Myanmar in January as a result of the serious economic and social challenges the country faces, Rice noted.

With respect to recognizing Myanmar's new government, Rice said that the IMF is always guided by the international community and its member states in such cases.

"We have had no communication at this point with the new regime," he added.

On Monday, Myanmar's military launched a coup and detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other senior members of the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military announced a one-year state of emergency in the country, vowing to take action against alleged voter fraud during the November 8 general election, which the NLD party won.

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US, France Expect Rapid Results in Beirut Blast Probe Without Interference - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The United States and France expect quick results from the investigation into the massive deadly blast in Beirut without any political interference, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said in a joint statement on Thursday.

"France and the United States also expect rapid results on the inquiry into the causes of the explosion," the statement said. "The Lebanese justice system must work transparently, removed from any political interference."

The statement comes on the six-month anniversary of the incident in the port of Beirut that claimed the lives of at least 190 people and injured 6,000 and emphasized the need for the Lebanese people to form a credible government.

"The six-month anniversary of this tragic event underscores the urgent and vital need for Lebanese stakeholders to finally act upon the commitments they have made to form a credible and effective government, and to pave the way for the implementation of necessary reforms, in accordance with the aspirations of the Lebanese people," the statement said.

Blinken and Le Drian underscored that such concrete actions are crucial for the engagement of the United States, France and their partners to provide additional and longer-term structural support to Lebanon.

The two officials also said France and the United States will continue to provide urgent aid to the Lebanese people, including health, education, housing and food assistance.

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UN Chief Calls on Israel, Palestine to Avoid Steps Harmful to Restarting Peace Process

UNITED NATIONS, February 4 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday called on Israel and Palestine to refrain from taking unilateral steps that can jeopardize the convening of an international summit to relaunch the peace process.

During the UN General Assembly in September, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas called on Guterres to convene in 2021 an international conference with the participation of the Middle East Quartet and for the UN Security Council to restart the peace process with an ultimate aim of putting an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

"President Mahmoud Abbas's call for an international peace conference... [provides] a positive opportunity to advance peace in the region. I call on the parties to refrain from unilateral acts that can jeopardize the possibility of restarting the peace process," Guterres said at a meeting of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

Guterres also noted that persistent acts of violence in the occupied West Bank as well Israeli movement and settlement activity exacerbate mistrust and remain major obstacles to the achievement of a two-state solution.

The two-state solution to the long-term Israeli–Palestinian conflict envisages the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. However, the parties have been unable to agree on the issue of borders, with Palestinians demanding to return to 1967 borders and Israel rejecting the claim.

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US Treasury Secretary Says Needs to 'Understand Deeply' GameStop Stock Before Acting

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Thursday that she was meeting financial and commodity market regulators to "understand deeply" the recent activity in shares of the video-gaming retailer GameStop and the silver market, before pursuing action.

"I'm actually hosting a meeting later this morning with top regulators at the SEC [Securities and Exchange Commission] and the Commodities Futures Trading Commission, and also the Federal Reserve, to discuss recent developments," Yellen said in an interview with ABC. "We need to understand deeply what happened before we go to action."

The Securities and Exchange Commission has been under pressure by hedge funds and other established Wall Street players to come up with stiffer trading regulations after retail investors on Reddit grouped to buy GameStop shares, sent them soaring and caused billions of dollars of losses for hedge funds.

The Reddit rally has been seen as a David vs Goliath battle has faded in recent days as the prices of almost all the targeted stocks collapsed, exposing some of the retail investors to losses.

Yellen declined to say what preliminary action, if any, she had in mind over the matter, but said insulating the market against crises would be her priority.

"We really need to make sure that our financial markets are functioning properly, efficiently and that investors are protected and we're going to discuss whether or not the recent events warrant further action. But certainly we're looking carefully at these events," Yellen said.

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Biden To Name Special Envoy for Yemen - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will appoint veteran diplomat Timothy Lenderkin as his special envoy for Yemen on Thursday, heralding a new effort to end a conflict in the country, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Biden is expected to make the announcement in his major foreign policy speech that he will deliver later in the day at the State Department.

The report described Lenderkin as a career diplomat with long experience in Gulf and Yemen affairs. Lenderkin will be tasked with encouraging the warring sides to take steps toward a ceasefire.

Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthi rebels since 2014. The United Nations considers Yemen the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with more than 80 percent of the population, or 24.1 million people, in need of assistance.

The Biden administration is reviewing its predecessor's decision to designate Houthis as a terrorist entity.

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US Seized Millions of Counterfeit Masks Last Year - Customs Agency

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US Customs officials seized millions of counterfeit face masks supposedly to protect against the COVID -19 pandemic in Fiscal Year 2020, more than half of them originating in China, Customs Border protection said in an annual report on Thursday.

"CBP ... seized a large number of counterfeit, unapproved or otherwise substandard COVID-19 related products that threatened the health and safety of American consumers," the report said. "These seizures included 177,356 Food and Drug Administration-prohibited COVID-19 test kits in 378 incidents [and] 12,709,390 counterfeit face masks in 352 incidents."

Customs officials also seized 38,098 Food and Drug Administration-prohibited chloroquine tablets in 221 incidents, the report said.

"Over half of these seizures, 53 percent, occurred in the express consignment environment; 24 percent were discovered in incoming mail, and roughly 51 percent originated in China," the CBP said.

The agency also collaborated with partner government bodies to expedite medical supplies and personal protective equipment through the customs clearance process, while working to identify and intercept fraudulent, unapproved, or otherwise substandard material, the report added.

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Russian Citizen Oksana Vovk Leaves US Prison to Be Deported to Russia - Sheriff's Office

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - Russian citizen Oksana Vovk has left a detention facility in the US state of Alabama to be deported to Russia after serving her one-and-a-half year prison term, the Pickens County sheriff's office told Sputnik on Thursday.

"She has left this facility. She is gone," a representative of the office said.

Vovk left the prison at 8.25 am local time without bond, a notice on the sheriff's office website said. "Charges: deportation to Russia," it added.

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US Capitol Police Secure COVID-19 Vaccines for All Officers - Chief

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police force (USPC), which suffered a mini coronavirus outbreak after the January 6 unrest involving a group of Trump supporters, managed to secure vaccine doses for every officer and staff, acting Chief Yogananda Pittman said on Thursday.

"Thanks to the efforts of the congressional leadership, especially House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the administration, enough doses of the COVID-19 vaccines have been secured to vaccinate all USCP personnel," Pittman said in a press release.

Pittman added that the vaccine doses are expected to arrive "shortly," with plans for shots to be administered by the Capitol's Office of the Attending Physician.

At least 38 Capitol Police officers and scores of National Guard troops tested positive for the novel coronavirus following the January 6 unrest at the Capitol by a group of protesters, who claimed massive election fraud cost former President Donald Trump his bid for a second term, according to media reports.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Dip for 3rd Week in Row as COVID-19 Pain Continues - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - US weekly jobless claims fell 4 percent last week, registering their third weekly decline even as the labor market and economy continued to struggle from the coronavirus pandemic, Labor Department data showed on Thursday.

"In the week ending January 30, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 779,000," the department said in a news release. It revised up claims in the prior week to January 16 to 812,000, from a previously published 847,000. That brought the latest week's claims down by 33,000, or 4 percent.

Claims fell 7 percent and 3 percent back-to-back in the prior two weeks.

Economists polled by US media had forecast 830,000 claims for last week.

Continuing weekly claims, reported with a one-week lag but sometimes considered a better gauge of the labor market, slid to 4.59 million for the week ended January 30 from a previous 4.79 million. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, slid to 3.2 percent from the 3.4 percent reported for the week to January 23.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, less than 700,000 jobs were added each month. In November, there were just 245,000

additions, while December saw a loss of 140,000 jobs — the first such decline since April. January's data will be published on Friday.

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US, Israel Start Juniper Falcon Drill at Various Locations in Israel, Germany - EUCOM

WASHINGTON, February 4 (Sputnik) - The United States and Israel have kicked off biennial joint air defense drills dubbed Juniper Falcon at several locations in Israel and Germany, US European Command said on Thursday.

"In accordance with long-standing bilateral agreements, US European Command (USEUCOM) and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have begun Exercise Juniper Falcon 2021 (JF21) at various locations in both Israel and Germany," the command said.

This year's joint exercises will likely be the last between Israel and EUCOM, as the Pentagon late last year announced that it would shift operations involving the Jewish state from its European headquarters to its Central Command (CENTCOM) following a series of US-brokered peace accords between the country and Arab states.

The exercise is designed to boost interoperability between the two countries' militaries and ensure the forces of both nations are prepared to respond to any contingency, specifically those involving ballistic missile defense or crisis response.

"Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, both the US and Israel are focused on building readiness in support of the United States' ironclad commitment to assist in the defense of Israel and are collaborating virtually to meet mutual training objectives," EUCOM said.

The Abraham Accords establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain and Israel were signed in Washington last September. Morocco and Sudan later followed suit, inking similar agreements with Israel. The rapprochement was met with harsh criticism in Palestine.

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