

Wires 9/2/20 Wednesday

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US Economic Recovery Slowed By Continued Impact of COVID-19 - Fed's Beige Book

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus crisis is throttling US economic recovery as many districts in the country see slowing growth even as manufacturing activity and consumer spending rise, the Federal Reserve's Beige Book report said on Wednesday.

"Continued uncertainty and volatility related to the pandemic, and its negative effect on consumer and business activity, was a theme echoed across the country," said the Fed report surveying business conditions in August. "But many districts noted a slowing pace of growth ... and total spending was still far below pre-pandemic levels."

The US economy shrank at its fastest pace in history in the second quarter of 2020, contracting by 32.9 percent amid widespread lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Beige Book report suggested that the recovery has been modest and spotty since then.

"Manufacturing rose in most districts, which coincided with increased activity at ports and among transportation and distribution firms," the report said. "Consumer spending continued to pick up, sparked by strong vehicle sales and some improvements in tourism and retail sectors." But on the overall, the outlook from the different US districts was modestly optimistic, with some expressing pessimism.

"Some districts also reported slowing job growth and increased hiring volatility, particularly in service industries, with rising instances of furloughed workers being laid off permanently as demand remained soft," the Fed said. "Firms continued to experience difficulty finding necessary labor, a matter compounded by day care availability, as well as uncertainty over the coming school year and jobless benefits."

August wages were flat to slightly higher in most districts, with greater pressure cited among lower-paying positions, " the report said.

"Some firms also rescinded previous pay cuts. Others, however, have looked to roll back hazard pay for high-exposure jobs, though some have chosen not to do so for staff morale and recruitment purposes," it added.

The coronavirus has so far infected more than 6 million Americans and killed nearly 185,000 of them, according to data tracked by Johns Hopkins University.

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Ex-DHS Official Says Trump Admin. Creating Conditions for Domestic Extremism - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration is creating conditions that may allow domestic right-wing extremism to expand in the United States, National Public Radio

(NPR) reported on Wednesday citing former Department of Homeland Security (DHS) official Elizabeth Neumann.

"If you had a very clear voice at the top, from the president, from other senior leaders in the Republican Party, denouncing this and warning conservatives - warning Republicans - that these groups are trying to recruit based on things that might sound like a typical conservative belief, but behind it is this insidious, ugly, evil thing, if we had more clear voices talking about it - it would somewhat inoculate people from that recruitment and that radicalization," Neumann said as quoted by NPR.

However, Neumann warned that the opposite situation is being observed in the United States. "We have the president [who is] not only pretty much refusing to condemn, but throwing fuel on the fire, creating opportunities for more recruitment through his rhetoric," she said.

The report noted that Neumann worked at the DHS as Assistant Secretary of Counterterrorism and Threat Prevention for three years before resigning in April.

Neumann told NPR that right-wing extremists in the United States borrowed from the playbook of the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) and learned how to radicalize people online. Moreover, Neumann said President Donald Trump was not comfortable talking about domestic terrorism unless it was in reference to the left-wing group Antifa and the riots and looting associated with it during the racial injustice protests this year.

Neumann added that the threat of domestic terrorism in the United States is not from Antifa, but from right-wing movements like the Boogaloo or QAnon.

The former DHS official said the use of the term "domestic terrorism" or any discussions about the white supremacist language "seems to derail things at the White House."

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ICC Rejects 'Unprecedented, Unacceptable' US Sanctions - State Parties Chief

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The International Criminal Court (ICC) condemns new US sanctions that threaten to undermine the common fight against impunity for mass atrocities, President of the Assembly of States Parties O-Gon Kwon said in a statement on Wednesday. Earlier in the day, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that ICC Prosecutor Fatou and Phakiso Mochochoko, director of the ICC's Jurisdiction, Complementary and Cooperation Division, have been added to the Office of Foreign Assets Control's Specially Designated Nationals List.

"Today the Government of the United States announced concrete measures against the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court and a senior staff member in her office. I strongly reject such unprecedented and unacceptable measures against a treaty-based international organization," O-Gon Kwon said. "They only serve to weaken our common endeavor to fight impunity for mass atrocities."

O-Gon Kwon stressed that the ICC is an independent and impartial judicial institution that strictly abides by the provisions of the Rome Statute in its operation.

"A meeting of the Bureau of the Assembly will take place shortly to consider the measures imposed by the United States and ways to give effect to our unstinting support for the Court," he said. "I call upon the States Parties and all the stakeholders in the Rome Statute system to reiterate once again our unwavering commitment to uphold and defend the principles and values enshrined in the Statute and to preserve its integrity undeterred by any measures and threats against the Court and its officials, staff and their families."

In March, the ICC authorized the commencement of an investigation into alleged war crimes committed by parties to the conflict in Afghanistan, including US personnel. In response, on June 11, US President Donald Trump had issued an executive order authorizing sanctions against ICC officials.

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US 2020 Budget Deficit Seen at \$3.3T In, Triple Last Year - Congressional Budget Office

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The US budget deficit is expected to more than triple from last year's level to reach a record \$3.3 trillion in 2020 due to COVID-19 costs and the recession forced by the pandemic, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said Wednesday. "CBO projects a federal budget deficit of \$3.3 trillion in 2020, more than triple the shortfall recorded in 2019," the agency said. "That increase is mostly the result of the economic disruption caused by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic and the enactment of legislation in response. At 16.0 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), the deficit in 2020 would be the largest since 1945."

The CBO also noted that the projected deficit for 2021 will be 8.6 percent of GDP. It said that between 1946 and 2019, the deficit as a share of GDP has been larger than that only twice. "As a result of those deficits, federal debt held by the public is projected to rise sharply, to 98 percent of GDP in 2020, compared with 79 percent at the end of 2019 and 35 percent in 2007, before the start of the previous recession. It would exceed 100 percent in 2021 and increase to 107 percent in 2023, the highest in the nation's history. The previous peak occurred in 1946 following the large deficits incurred during World War II. By 2030, debt would equal 109 percent of GDP."

The swelling of the US budget and deficit come after stimulus measures of more than \$2 trillion passed by Congress this year to rescue the economy from the coronavirus pandemic.

The US economy shrank at its fastest pace in history in the second quarter of 2020, contracting by 32.9 percent amid widespread lockdowns due to the pandemic. While economic and labor market data since have sometimes been encouraging, the recovery has still been spotty.

The Federal Reserve cautioned in its Beige Book report on Wednesday that the COVID-19 was throttling US economic recovery as many districts see slowing growth even as manufacturing activity and consumer spending rise, helped by strong auto sales, among others.

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EU Considering Sanctions on 15 Belarusians Over Alleged Election Fraud - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The European Union is considering imposing sanctions on up to 15 individuals from Belarus for allegedly taking part in election fraud and violence against protesters, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs George Kent said on Wednesday.

"My understanding is the EU... is thinking of about ten to fifteen names," Kent said during a virtual panel discussion at the German Marshall Fund think tank on Wednesday.

Kent said the United States will continue to consult with its allies and partners in Europe to coordinate potential targeted sanctions against individuals connected to the unrest in Belarus. Kent added that the United States is not considering at present a suspension of the waivers that allowed Belarus to buy North American crude oil earlier this year.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly accused Western nations of directly interfering in the country's internal affairs. Russia has also voiced concerns about foreign interference in Belarus' sovereign affairs.

On August 9, the Belarus opposition organized protests after disputing the results of the presidential election in which Lukashenko was reelected for a sixth term by winning 80 percent of the vote. The opposition insists that its candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, won the election.

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US CDC Alerts States to Prepare for COVID-19 Vaccine in October - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has alerted public health officials across the United States in all 50 states and five major cities that they should be ready to start distributing a new COVID-19 vaccine by late October or early November, the New York Times reported on Wednesday.

The CDC based in Atlanta sent out the alert in documents on August 27, the same day that President Donald Trump told the Republican National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina that a vaccine might be available to the US public before the end of this year, the report said. A forecasting model by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington released on Wednesday predicted that the US COVID-19 death toll would exceed 260,000 by Election Day on November 3.

The IHME model also predicted more than 317,000 total COVID-19 deaths in the United States by December 1. However, that figure would drop to around 250,000 if 95 percent of Americans wore face masks when leaving their homes, the institute said.

As of Wednesday, the United States had recorded 184,914 deaths from COVID-19 and 6,094,562 cases overall, according to the Johns Hopkins University.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 2 Officials at International Criminal Court - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The US government is imposing sanctions on a prosecutor and another official working with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague, the Treasury Department announced on Wednesday.

"The following individuals have been added to OFAC [Office of Foreign Assets Control]'s SDN [Specially Designated Nationals] List," the Treasury Department said in a sanctions update. It named the two individuals as Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda from The Gambia and Phakiso Mochochoko from Lesotho.

Earlier in the day, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed the sanctioning of the two ICC officials.

"Pursuant to Executive Order 13928, the United States will designate ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, and the ICC's Head of Jurisdiction, Complementary, and Cooperation Division Phakiso Mochochoko for having materially assisted Prosecutor Bensouda," Pompeo said. Individuals and entities that continued to materially support those two individuals risked exposure to sanctions as well, he warned.

Pompeo had ordered a travel ban to the United States on Bensouda and some of her officials because of their efforts to investigate claims of torture and other crimes carried out by US citizens in Afghanistan.

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Canada Top Diplomat Calls on Russian Authorities to Investigate Alleged Navalny Poisoning

TORONTO, September 2 (Sputnik) - Canadian Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne on Wednesday called on the Russian authorities to investigate the alleged poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

Earlier in the day, a German government spokesman said that a test of Navalny's samples at a military laboratory in Germany showed the Russian activist was poisoned with a nerve agent of the Novichok group.

"Canada strongly condemns the attack against Alexey Navalny, who has been poisoned with a chemical nerve agent. Russian authorities must explain what happened and those responsible must be held accountable," Champagne said via Twitter.

Canada's top diplomat called the alleged use of chemical weapons "despicable and abhorrent." Leonid Rink, who was directly involved in the development of Novichok, told Sputnik that the symptoms of Navalny's alleged poisoning are absolutely uncharacteristic of the Novichok use.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that tests performed on Navalny in Russia prior to his transfer to Germany did not indicate any toxic agents in his body.

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US Informed WHO Chief of \$62Mln Funding Cut - State Dept.

UNITED NATIONS, September 2 (Sputnik) - The United States informed World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus that Washington is reprogramming \$62 million to finalize its withdrawal from the body, State Department official Nerissa Cook said on Wednesday.

"Today, we are announcing the remaining portion of the 2020 assessment, slightly more than \$62 million, will be reprogrammed to the UN to pay other assessments," Cook said in a briefing. "The information... was also presented to WHO Director-General Tedros."

Cook said \$58 million had already been contributed at the time of President Donald Trump's April decision to suspend additional funding. Washington pulled out of the WHO earlier this year after claiming the body helped China conceal information about the origins of COVID-19. The WHO said its January 30 emergency declaration gave the United States sufficient time to prepare while Beijing has said it has been transparent about the details of the virus's origins.

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US Will Make One-Time \$68Mln Disbursement to WHO for Aid to Middle East - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The United States will make a one-time disbursement of \$68 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) to support humanitarian efforts in the Middle East, US Agency for International Development (USAID) Assistant Administrator for Global Health Alma Golden said during a conference call on Wednesday.

"We will make a one-time disbursement of up to \$68 million to the WHO to support humanitarian health assistance in Libya and Syria," Golden said.

Golden explained that up to \$44 million would go toward the eradication of polio, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The State Department's Bureau of International Organization Affairs Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Nerissa Cook said during the conference call that the Trump administration will redirect \$62 million in unused WHO funding to the United Nations to pay for other assessments.

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Pompeo to Attend Next Week's Virtual ASEAN Ministerial - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will take part in the East Asia Summit (EAS) Foreign Ministers' meeting next week, Department of State Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Secretary Pompeo looks forward to meeting with his ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] counterparts and Foreign Ministers from across the Indo-Pacific region September 9-11 in the ASEAN-related Ministerial Meetings," Ortagus said.

Ortagus described the EAS as the region's premier leaders-led forum on political and security issues.

"The Secretary will address US priorities in the Indo-Pacific and share details on our efforts to support a free and open region based on principles of sovereignty and pluralism," she said.

On September 11, Pompeo will co-chair the inaugural Mekong-US Partnership Ministerial Meeting and launch the Mekong-US Partnership with the Foreign Ministers of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, Ortagus added.

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Portland Man Charged With Assaulting Federal Agents With Vehicle - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - A Portland, Oregon resident was charged with attempting to hit federal law enforcement agents with his car and faces up to eight years in prison if found guilty, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"Lonnie Vantewa Albert, 55, of Portland, has been charged by criminal complaint for allegedly assaulting two Federal Protective Service officers with a sport utility vehicle on August 30, 2020, announced Billy J. Williams, U.S. Attorney for the District of Oregon," the department said in a statement.

Albert is suspected of at least two attempts to ram the agents who were en route to a hotel "wearing their government-issued uniform with visible police patches and a badge." Both were deployed to Portland "in support of ongoing federal law enforcement operations."

The defendant made his first appearance in federal court on Tuesday and was released on conditions pending further proceedings.

Portland, a predominately white city in America's northwest, is home to the nation's longest and arguably most intense protests, which has been raging for over three months. They grew in numbers in mid-summer when the federal forces were deployed in the city by President Donald Trump, despite the opposition of local Democratic authorities.

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Biden Says US Schools Would Be Reopening Safely if Trump Had Done His Job

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden in a speech on Wednesday said US schools would be reopening safely if President Donald Trump and his administration did their job amid the pandemic.

"Our government hasn't come up to that bar: They haven't shown much grit or determination," Biden said. "If President Trump and his administration had done their job, the schools would be

opening... Going back to school for millions of children and their families is a national emergency."

Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, Biden added, failed to work with Congress and did not offer any serious coordinated plan to guide state and local authorities.

Biden added that if elected president, he would declare a national emergency on the issue of schools reopening and would order the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide disaster relief aid for all K-12 schools.

Earlier this week, FEMA officials announced they would no longer cover the cost of cloth face masks and disinfectant for use in US schools.

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Russia, China Ambassadors to US Reaffirm Strategic Partnership on WWII Victory Day

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The Russian and Chinese ambassadors to the United States, Anatoly Antonov and Cui Tiankai, in a joint article published on Wednesday on a US news site reaffirmed their countries' commitment to a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination."

The publication on Defense One marks the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II and the defeat of Japan by the coalition which included the Soviet Union, the United States and China.

"Russia and China have made the right choices. We will stay committed to our comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination, push forward cooperation as good neighbors and friends, promote global stability and security, and contribute to the prosperity and wellbeing of all countries," the ambassadors wrote. "We believe that the best way to commemorate the war is to avoid a repeat of the tragedy and join hands to open up a better future."

They urged to maintain the international system "born from World War II, with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter as the core" and keep multilateralism in practice.

"Seventy-five years ago, our fathers laid the cornerstone of the modern international order with the wisdom of all parties, establishing the United Nations and formulating the charter. We still have the obligation to maintain and develop this order and system that has made great contributions to world peace, security, and stability through the basic norms of international relations," the ambassadors said.

They argued that nations should strive for "win-win cooperation" and renounce "the law of jungle," which "leaves the weak at the mercy of the strong," as a way to conduct their relations. "Those who adopt the high-handed approach of using force will find that they are only lifting a rock to drop on their own feet. We should give up the thinking of a zero-sum game, strive for win-win cooperation, and realize the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind," the ambassadors wrote.

They congratulated the United States, "our ally at the time", on the anniversary and thanked its "Greatest Generation" - the veterans - for their sacrifice.

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Organizers Select 4 Journalists to Moderate 2020 US Presidential Debates

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) announced on Wednesday that it has selected four journalists to moderate the 2020 presidential and vice presidential debates.

President Donald Trump and his Democratic rival Joe Biden will engage in three televised debates on September 29, October 15 and 22. Their running mates, Vice President Mike Pence and Senator Kamala Harris, are scheduled to a debate on October 7.

The CPD said the first presidential debate will be moderated by Fox News Sunday anchor Chris Wallace. The second and third debates will be moderated by, C-SPAN senior executive producer Steve Scully and NBC News White House correspondent Kristen Welker.

Susan Page, Washington Bureau Chief of USA Today, has been chosen to moderate the vice presidential debate, CDP also said.

All debates will be moderated by a single person and will run from 9:00 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. EST without commercial breaks.

The CPD said the first and the third presidential debates will be divided into six segments of approximately 15 minutes each on major topics to be selected by the moderator and announced at least one week before the event.

The second debate will take the form of a town hall meeting during which citizens will pose questions, the CPD added.

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US Oil Output Fell Over 1Mln Barrels Per Day Amid Hurricane - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, Sept 2 (Sputnik) - US oil production fell by an estimated 1.1 million barrels per day last week to reach 9.7 million bpd as Hurricane Laura hit the Gulf of Mexico, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said on Wednesday.

The EIA estimated a record high crude production of 13.1 million barrels per day in mid-March as the United States stood as the world's largest oil producer. In its latest update on supply-demand of petroleum for the week ended August 21, the agency cited daily production at 3.4 million barrels below that high.

"This is a sharp scale down in the EIA's production estimates for a week and the 1.1 million bpd drop seems like a number distorted by Hurricane Laura," John Kilduff, founding partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital and a regular commentator on oil, told Sputnik. "I expect this number to be corrected in a week or two when the storm impact becomes clearer."

The US Department of Interior reported on Tuesday that some 28.4 percent of oil production from the Gulf of Mexico, accounting for 525,099 barrels per day, was shut in precaution ahead of the hurricane.

Laura, one of the strongest US hurricanes in more than a century, made landfall between east Texas and west Louisiana as a Category 4 hurricane at pre-dawn Thursday before turning into a tropical storm. The storm, which killed at least 16 people and damaged countless property, also scored a near-direct hit on one refinery in Louisiana processing 769,000 barrels per day of crude.

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US to Work With Allies to Hold Accountable People for Navalny's Alleged Poisoning - NSC

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is very concerned about the alleged poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny and will work with its allies to bring to justice those responsible for the poisoning, National Security Council (NSC) spokesman John Ulyot said in a statement to Sputnik on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said that laboratory test results show Navalny had been poisoned with a nerve agent belonging to the Novichok group. Seibert added that Germany plans to contact the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and notify its EU and NATO allies to work out a joint reaction.

"The United States is deeply troubled by the results released today. Alexei Navalny's poisoning is completely reprehensible," Ulyot said. "Russia has used the chemical nerve agent Novichok in the past. We will work with allies and the international community to hold those in Russia accountable, wherever the evidence leads, and restrict funds for their malign activities." Ulyot said the Russian people have a right to express their views peacefully without fear of retribution of any kind and "certainly not with chemical agents."

On Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that a whole range of tests was conducted on Navalny in Russia before being taken to Germany and the results showed no toxic substances were present.

Russia is ready for an all-round interaction with Germany to clarify the situation regarding Navalny, but the Kremlin notes that Berlin did not respond to the previously sent official inquiries, Peskov added.

Asked how the Kremlin will react to Berlin's statement claiming Navalny was poisoned, Peskov said: "At the moment, we cannot competently respond to these statements."

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Wednesday that Germany's allegations came with no evidence, noting that Berlin first addressed the issue with the European Union and NATO rather than Russia.

Zakharova expressed it was perplexing why Germany would first address the matter with third parties such as Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) rather than addressing them with Russia right away.

If Berlin's goal is to conduct a genuine investigation, as is the case for Russia, then the Navalny case should be reviewed within the legal framework, given that the political will and legal tools are present to give it a go, Zakharova added.

Navalny fell ill on a flight from Siberia to Moscow last week and was taken to a hospital in the Russian city of Omsk. He went into a coma and was flown to Germany two days later where doctors said tests revealed intoxication with a substance from the group of cholinesterase inhibitors.

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UN Chief Notes With Concern US Imposing Sanctions on ICC Senior Officials - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 2 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has expressed concern about the United States' decision to impose sanctions on International Criminal Court (ICC) senior officials, including Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, and continues to closely monitor developments on the matter, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that Bensouda from Gambia and Phakiso Mochochoko from Lesotho have been added to the Office of Foreign Assets Control's Specially Designated Nationals List.

"The Secretary-General takes note with concern of today's statement by the United States Secretary of State announcing the designation of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court and the Head of the Jurisdiction Complementarity and Cooperation Division," Dujarric said. "We continue to closely follow developments on this matter."

Dujarric pointed out that the United Nations will analyze the possible implications the US decision may have on implementing the UN-ICC Relationship Agreement based on which the cooperation of the two organizations is founded.

The spokesperson added that the United Nations expects the restrictions would still allow the two officials to travel to work at the UN headquarters in New York, in line with the US obligations under the UN Headquarters Agreement.

Under the latter agreement, the United States should not impose any obstacles on the movement to or from the United Nations headquarters of UN member states' officials who seek to attend events at the organization and should promptly issue them visas.

In March, the ICC authorized the commencement of an investigation into alleged war crimes committed by parties to the conflict in Afghanistan, including US personnel.

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US Citizen Captured by SDF Pleads Guilty to Terror Charges - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - A US citizen who allegedly helped run communications systems for the Islamic State terrorist group (outlawed in Russia) for five years in Syria has pleaded guilty in a US court to a charge of supporting terrorism, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"Omer Kuzu – a 23-year-old US citizen captured by the Syrian Democratic Forces and returned to the United States by the FBI after a five-year stint handling communications for ISIS [the Islamic State] - pleaded guilty Wednesday to conspiring to provide material support to terrorism," the Justice Department said in a statement.

In his plea papers, Kuzu admitted that in late October 2014 he entered Islamic State-occupied territories via Turkey and was sent to the second lines in Kobani, Syria and Hama, Syria, to provide communications support for Islamic State fighters on the front lines and also worked in the Caliphate's technology center, the release said.

"This defendant, an American citizen radicalized on American soil, pledged allegiance to a brutal terrorist group and traveled halfway across the world to enact its agenda," said US Attorney Erin Nealy Cox for the Northern District of Texas. "The United States must do everything we can to prevent and deter this type of radicalization."

Kuzu also admitted that he pledged allegiance, or "Bay'ah," to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic Caliphate. He was given a monthly stipend, a Chinese-made AK 47, and an IS bride, he said.

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US Reports Increase in Jet Fuel Consumption Second Only to China - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - Consumption of jet fuel by US commercial airlines, while less than half of levels a year ago, has nevertheless recovered at a faster rate than in every other region with the exception of China, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in a report on Wednesday.

"EIA estimates that as of August 16, 2020, consumption of jet fuel by US commercial passenger flights was approximately 612,000 barrels per day (b/d), 43 percent of the estimated amount consumed on the same date one year earlier," the release said.

While still depressed, the latest estimate reflects a huge increase from levels approaching just 200,000 b/d in late April, when the spread of the novel coronavirus reached pandemic levels, according to earlier EIA reports.

The latest estimate shows a recovery in US airlines leading that in Europe, where fuel consumption remains 36 percent below year-ago levels, 31 percent for sub-Saharan Africa, 30 percent for the Mideast and North Africa and 24 percent for the rest of Asia apart from China, the report said.

Only one nation, China, managed to top the US recovery, with jet fuel consumption just 60 percent below 2019 levels, the report added.

Reliance on domestic as opposed to international travel explains much of the variation, with domestic flights less affected by COVID-19 than long-haul travel, according to the report.

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Former UN Official Charged for Attempt to Cover Up Sexual Assaults - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - A former United Nations official has been arrested and charged in US federal court for lying to investigators in an effort to cover up his sexual assault against multiple women while he worked at the world body, the Department of Justice said in a press release on Wednesday.

"KARIM ELKORANY, a former communications specialist with the United Nations ("UN") in Iraq, was charged in an Indictment in Manhattan federal court with two counts of making false statements to special agents of the FBI in an effort to conceal his drugging and sexual assault of multiple women while he worked for the UN," the release said.

The Justice Department said, citing court documents, that Ekorany drugged and sexually assaulted at least five women from 2009 to 2016.

Elkorany is facing two counts of making false statements to the FBI, each of which carries up to five years in prison, the release said.

Elkorany worked for the United Nations from at least 2005 to 2018 on international aid and development, the release added.

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Canada, Netherlands to Intervene in Rohingya Genocide Case Before ICJ - Joint Statement

TORONTO, September 2 (Sputnik) - Canada and the Netherlands will intervene and assist in the Rohingya genocide case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the two countries said in a joint statement on Wednesday.

"Canada and the Kingdom of the Netherlands would like to express their joint intention to intervene in the matter of The Gambia v. Myanmar, a contentious case brought by The Gambia against Myanmar at the [ICJ] alleging violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," the statement said.

The two countries intend to assist with the legal aspects of the case and will put the spotlight on "crimes related to sexual and gender-based violence, including rape," the statement said.

Last November, Gambia initiated proceedings at the ICJ against Myanmar and accused it of engaging in atrocities on a massive scale against the Rohingya Muslims.

The conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State between the Rohingya and the Buddhist majority dates back to the 20th century. The central authorities and the Buddhist population consider the Rohingya to be undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh.

Tensions escalated in August 2017 when Myanmar's military launched a major offensive on Rohingya villages and outposts in the Rakhine state after unidentified Islamic extremists attacked police and security posts. According to the United Nations, about 745,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since Myanmar's large-scale security forces' campaign in 2017.

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Biden Lead Over Trump Slips to Razor-Thin Margin in Key US Battleground State - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - A double-digit lead for Democratic candidate Joe Biden over President Donald Trump in mid-July all but vanished with the presidential hopefuls now in a statistical tie in the key battleground state of Pennsylvania, a new Monmouth University poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Joe Biden holds a 4-point lead over Donald Trump among all registered voters in Pennsylvania," a press release explaining the poll said. "Among likely voters, the race is a tight 1 to 3 points, depending on the expected turnout level."

Monmouth's previous poll in mid-July showed registered voter intent in Pennsylvania at 53 percent for Biden and 40 percent for Trump. The latest poll has a margin of error of 4.9 percent, the release said.

Trump owes his 2016 victory over candidate Hillary Clinton to narrow victories in Pennsylvania and two other heavily Democratic states - Wisconsin and Michigan - with many pundits predicting that the three will again play an outside role in determining the winner of the November 3 election.

"This is really a game of inches. The Trump campaign is looking to peel off a little bit of Biden support here and a little bit there," Monmouth University Polling Institute Director Patrick Murray said in the release.

The 4 percent margin shrinks when statisticians apply different voter turnout assumptions to the tally because many registered voters in the United States fail to cast ballots.

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UN Not in Position at Present to Comment on Navalny's Alleged Poisoning - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is not in a position at this point to comment on the alleged poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny and believes that if it is confirmed that he has been poisoned, the case should be investigated by the relevant authorities, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, Germany, where Navalny was transported for treatment from an acute health condition, said his test results showed traces of a nerve agent from the Novichok group.

"We have just seen the media reports, not too long ago, regarding Mr. Navalny. At this point, we are not in a position to comment on the substance of the claims," Dujarric said. "If warranted, the issue should be investigated by relevant authorities."

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US to Work With Allies to Hold Accountable People for Navalny's Alleged Poisoning - NSC

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is very concerned about the alleged poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny and will work with its allies to bring those responsible for the poisoning to justice, National Security Council (NSC) spokesman John Ulyot said in a statement to Sputnik on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said that laboratory results show Navalny had been poisoned with a nerve agent belonging to the Novichok group.

Germany plans to contact the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and notify its EU and NATO allies to work out a joint reaction, he added.

"The United States is deeply troubled by the results released today. Alexei Navalny's poisoning is completely reprehensible," Ulyot said. "Russia has used the chemical nerve agent Novichok in the past. We will work with allies and the international community to hold those in Russia accountable, wherever the evidence leads, and restrict funds for their malign activities."

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United Airlines to Cut 16,000 Jobs Amid Pandemic-Induced Drop in Demand - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - United Airlines will cut more than 16,000 jobs as early as next month as government aid runs out amid the COVID-19 pandemic, CNBC reported on Wednesday.

The planned involuntary cuts of 16,370 jobs include 6,920 flight attendants, 2,850 pilots, 1,400 management jobs, 2,010 mechanics and 2,260 in airport operations, the network said. The move comes following massive layoffs announced by American Airlines.

The separations are defined as "furloughs" meaning employees can be called back if demand returns, and would make up close to 17 percent of United's staffing level at the end of 2019.

"The pandemic has drawn us in deeper and lasted longer than almost any expert predicted, and in an environment where travel demand is so depressed, United cannot continue with staffing levels that significantly exceed the schedule we fly," CNBC quoted a United employee memo as saying.

American Airlines said last week it expected to lay off another 19,000 employees, or about 14 percent of its workforce, by October when federal aid that protected those jobs expires and the COVID-19 continues to devastate air travel.

Aid for airlines and other sectors to hold on to their workers is running out as the Trump administration haggles with opposition Democrat lawmakers in Congress over the next COVID-19 relief bill. The Democrats want the administration to approve more than \$2 trillion for the new relief, similar to what was passed in April. Republican lawmakers, meanwhile, say a new package of about \$500 billion is just about right to meet immediate needs.

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Pompeo, Swiss Counterpart Discuss US Hostages Imprisoned by Iran - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Mike Pompeo thanked Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis for Switzerland's role in repatriating US hostages imprisoned by Iran, the State Department Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said on Wednesday.

"Secretary Pompeo thanked Foreign Minister Cassis for Switzerland's continued and constructive role as our protecting power in Iran and for its assistance in caring for and repatriating US citizens wrongly imprisoned by the Iranian regime," Ortagus said in a statement. The US has no diplomatic ties with Iran and relies on the Swiss embassy in Tehran to represent the US.

Iran holds at least five American citizens, some of whom were detained before Trump took office, according to media reports. Another American, Robert Levinson disappeared in Iran more than a decade ago.

The release of detained Americans is one of multiple US conditions for removing economic sanctions against Iran and normalizing bilateral relations.

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US Weighing 'Significant Targeted Sanctions' Against Rights Violators in Belarus - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The United States government is considering "significant targeted sanctions" against individuals involved in human rights abuses amid the ongoing civil unrest in Belarus, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters on Wednesday.

"We are also tracking the situation in Belarus closely ... we are closely coordinating too with our Transatlantic partners and are together reviewing significant targeted sanctions on anyone involved in human rights abuses and oppression," Pompeo said.

Pompeo also reiterated the United States' demands for an immediate halt to violence against protesters and the release of detainees.

On Tuesday, media reported the Trump administration is considering sanctions against seven Belarusians for allegedly engaging in election fraud and violence against protesters. The names

of the seven individuals were allegedly shared with the European Union weeks earlier and the sanctions are expected to be made public in the coming days, according to the reports. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly accused Western nations of directly interfering in the country's internal affairs.

Russia has also voiced concerns about foreign interference in the Belarus' sovereign affairs.

On August 9, the Belarus opposition organized protests after disputing the results of the presidential election in which incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko was reelected for a sixth term by winning 80 percent of the vote. The opposition insists that its candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, won the election.

According to the Belarusian Interior Ministry, three people have died and several hundred others have sustained injuries during the ongoing unrest.

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Biden to Hold 'Community Meeting' in Riot-Torn Kenosha on Wednesday - Campaign

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden will hold a community meeting on his visit to the small city of Kenosha in the US state of Wisconsin which has been wracked by rioting since the police shooting of African-American Jacob Blake, Jr., Biden's campaign announced on Wednesday.

"Joe Biden and Dr. [Jill] Biden will travel to Wisconsin, " Biden's Deputy Press Secretary Matt Hill said in a Twitter message. "Joe Biden will hold a community meeting in Kenosha to bring together Americans to heal and address the challenges we face."

On Tuesday, President Donald Trump visited Kenosha and toured a section of the city damaged by rioting last week, including the remains of a family-owned furniture store and a camera shop which were nearly entirely burnt to the ground to push forward his message of law and order. Trump doubled down on President Richard Nixon's successful 1968 strategy of pitching himself as the law-and-order candidate, as opposed to Democrats who, in his view, are neglecting public safety.

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US Urges Turkey, Greece to Deescalate Tensions in East Mediterranean - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is urging Turkey, Greece and other stakeholders to deescalate diplomatically tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters on Wednesday.

"We are urging everyone to stand down to reduce tensions and begin to have diplomatic discussions about the conflicts that exist there in the Eastern Mediterranean - the security conflicts, the energy resource conflicts, the maritime conflicts," Pompeo said during a briefing.

The appeal comes a day after the US partially lifted a Cyprus arms embargo which was in place for 33 years to reduce tensions in the island. Cyprus has been de facto divided into the Republic of Cyprus, allied with Greece, and the non-recognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus since the 1970s, when Turkey sent troops in response to an attempted coup by the Greek military.

Pompeo said that US President Donald Trump has spoken recently to the leadership of both Greece and Turkey.

"They need to sit down and have conversations about this and resolve this diplomatically. It's not useful to increase military tension in the region. Only negative things can flow from that," he said.

Latest tensions in the region stem from recent discoveries of natural gas in areas with overlapping territorial claims. The most recent dispute surfaced after Turkey began exploratory drillings in waters claimed by Greece. Greece responded by mobilizing its armed forces to high alert and vowing to protect its sovereign rights by all means necessary.

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Pompeo Says Will Meet With ASEAN Counterparts Next Week to Discuss China, COVID-19

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a press briefing on Wednesday that he will meet virtually with his Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) counterparts next week to discuss China and a wide range of other pressing issues.

"I look forward to seeing my ASEAN Indo-Pacific counterparts next week in a host of virtual meetings," Pompeo said. "We'll have discussion that will be wide ranging including on COVID-19, North Korea, South China Sea, Hong Kong and Burma's Rakhine state." Moreover, Pompeo said that he will raise the issue of how Washington is restoring reciprocity to the US-China relationship.

The ASEAN region is becoming the center of global production as the impact of the measures to fight the novel coronavirus pandemic is contributing to a change in the world economic world order, according to analysts.

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Canada's Liberal, Conservative Parties in Tie Ahead of Possible Fall Election - Poll

TORONTO, September 2 (Sputnik) - Canada's preeminent political parties, the Liberals and Conservatives, are in a deadlock ahead of a possible fall election, an Angus Reid Institute poll revealed on Wednesday.

An election can be triggered as early as September 23, when the Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government presents its long-term COVID-19 economic recovery plan via a throne speech. The Prime Minister's recovery plan will then be put to a vote and a fall election could be called, if the speech does not get a vote of confidence.

"The incumbent Liberals face strong competition the Conservative Party of Canada, whose party based remains as solid and committed as ever... the party is currently tied in vote intention nationally, with both the Liberals and Conservatives at 35 per cent among decided voters," the study found.

Wednesday's findings show that increased support for the Liberal Party and Trudeau amid the COVID-19 pandemic has been tempered by the ongoing WE Charity scandal.

In May, polls showed the Liberal Party ahead by as many as 11 points nationally, boosted by majority support for the federal government's response to the pandemic.

However, revelations that the Trudeau government awarded a \$670-million sole-source contract to WE Charity to administer a government-sponsored program despite the prime minister, his family and members of his cabinet enjoying a close relationship with the charity sparked outrage.

The Prime Minister's approval rating has also taken a hit, sliding nearly 10 percent to 45% since April.

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White House Adviser to Meet UK Foreign Secretary Over Mideast Peace Efforts - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - White House adviser Jared Kushner plans to huddle with UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab in London on Thursday while heading home from a Mideast tour, Politico reported on Wednesday.

Kushner plans to brief Raab on his visits to Arab nations in the Persian Gulf region during the past week, where he sought to promote ties with Israel – such as the recent establishment of diplomatic relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Jewish state, the report said.

Kushner's agenda was widely interpreted as an attempt to broker another show of reconciliation between Israel and Arab leaders ahead of November 3 presidential elections, and also form a coalition to counter Iranian influence in the region, the report added.

Kushner's portfolio includes attempts to a secure a Mideast peace deal.

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China's Diplomats Now Need Approval to Visit US Universities, Meet Officials - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - Senior Chinese diplomats in the United States will now need to ask the Department of State for approval before visiting American universities and meeting with local officials, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in a statement on Wednesday.

"The Department of State will now require senior PRC diplomats in the United States to receive approval to visit US university campuses and to meet with local government officials," Pompeo said.

Cultural events with an audience larger than 50 people hosted by Chinese diplomats outside of mission properties will also require Department of State approval, he added.

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US Hopes for Peaceful Resolution of Situation on India-China Border - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is hopeful that the tensions on the India-China border will be resolved peacefully, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We are hoping for a peaceful resolution to the situation on the India-China border from the Taiwan Strait to the Himalayas and beyond," Pompeo said. "The Chinese Communist Party is engaged in a clear and intensifying pattern of bullying its neighbors."

On Monday, Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said India is aware of China's economic and political rise as it is directly impacted by Beijing's actions. Jaishankar also said it was important to reach mutual understanding between Beijing and New Delhi amid escalating tensions.

Jaishankar's comments came in light of the latest incident between China and India along a disputed portion of their border as Beijing accused Indian troops of crossing the line of control and thus undermined China's territorial sovereignty.

Relations between India and China are burdened by border conflict given that the two countries do not have a marked border. Instead, there is Line of Actual Control, created after the 1962 war between them.

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Biden Lead Over Trump Shrinks to 7% Amid Fears of Fraudulent US Election Results - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's lead over President Donald Trump settled at 7 percent following last month's Republican and Democratic national conventions, down from 12 percent in June, a new USA Today/Suffolk University Poll revealed on Wednesday.

However, the biggest takeaway from the survey reflects widespread skepticism among voters of both major political parties that vote tallies that emerge from the November 3 election cannot be trusted, a USA Today report explaining the poll said.

"If their candidate loses, one in four voters say they aren't prepared to accept the outcome as fair and accurate - a signal of potential trouble ahead for a nation already engulfed in a deadly pandemic and riven over issues of racial justice," the report said.

In all, 28 percent of Biden's supporters say they are not prepared to accept a Trump victory as fairly won; 19 percent of Trumps supporters say they are not prepared to accept a Biden victory as legitimate.

What's more, an overwhelming 83 percent of Republicans say they are at least somewhat concerned that mail-in voting will lead to voter fraud; 62 percent are very concerned, according to the report.

Trump has warned of widespread voter fraud, especially in states that plan to mail an actual ballot to every person listed on voter rolls, as opposed to states that simply mail out applications that must be submitted before one can receive a vote-by-mail ballot.

Meanwhile, the report noted that Biden's 7 percentage point lead over Trump in the latest poll was identical to a 7-point lead over Trump enjoyed by Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton at the same point in the 2016 presidential campaign.

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US Weighing 'Significant Targeted Sanctions' Against Rights Violators In Belarus - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) – The United States government is considering "significant targeted sanctions" against those involved in human rights abuses amid ongoing civil unrest in Belarus, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters on Wednesday.

"We are also tracking the situation in Belarus closely ... we are closely coordinating too with our Transatlantic partners and are together reviewing significant targeted sanctions on anyone involved in human rights abuses and oppression," Pompeo said.

Pompeo also reiterated US demands for an immediate halt to violence against protesters and the release of detainees.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 2 Officials at International Criminal Court - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The US government is imposing sanctions on a prosecutor and another official working with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, the Treasury Department announced on Wednesday.

"The following individuals have been added to OFAC [Office of Foreign Assets Control]'s SDN [Specially Designated Nationals] List," the Treasury Department said in a sanctions update. It named the two individuals as Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda from The Gambia and Phakiso Mochochoko from Lesotho.

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Eighty One Nobel Prize Winners for Science Endorse Biden for US President - Letter

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - A total of 81 US Nobel Prize winners for Physics, Chemistry and Medicine have endorsed Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden in the 2020 election against President Donald Trump in a letter released on Wednesday.

"As American citizens and as scientists, we wholeheartedly endorse Joe Biden for President," the letter said.

The scientists, Nobel laureates in physics, chemistry and medicine, said they signed the letter to express their support for Biden in the 2020 election for president of the United States.

"During his long record of public service, Joe Biden has consistently demonstrated his willingness to listen to experts, his understanding of the value of international collaboration in research, and his respect for the contribution that immigrants make to the intellectual life of our country," the letter said.

The support of scores of Nobel Prize-winning scientists for a Democratic candidate for the presidency is not unprecedented. In 2016, 70 Nobel laureates endorsed former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. In 2008, 76 US Nobel laureates endorsed successful Democratic candidate Barack Obama.

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US Blocks Release of Report Claiming Russia Plans to Attack Biden Mental Health – Reports

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) halted the dissemination of an intelligence report in early July warning of Russian plans to meddle in the upcoming presidential election by promoting allegations that Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden suffers from poor mental health, ABC News reported on Wednesday.

ABC based its report on internal emails, as well as a draft of the intelligence document obtained by the network.

The draft bulletin, titled "Russia Likely to Denigrate Health of US Candidates to Influence 2020 Election," was submitted to the agency's legislative and public affairs office for review on July 7.

The analysis was not meant for public consumption, but was slated for distributed to federal, state and local law enforcement partners agencies on July 9, the report said, citing emails obtained by ABC.

DHS Chief of Staff John Gountanis halted the release, saying he wished to first discuss the document with acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf before proceeding. The document still has not been released, according to the network.

A spokesperson for DHS told ABC that the bulletin's release was "delayed" because it failed to meet the agency's standards.

Russia has repeatedly and emphatically denied allegations that Moscow interfered in the 2016 presidential election and rejected more recent claims of plans to do the same in the US campaign ahead of the November 3 vote.

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Trump to Block DC Mayor From Removing Jefferson Memorial, Washington Monument - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump will not allow the mayor of the nation's capital to go through with plans to remove the Washington Monument, the Jefferson Memorial and other historic statutes, the White House said in a statement.

"As long as President Trump is in the White House, the mayor's irresponsible recommendations will go absolutely nowhere, and as the mayor of our Nation's capital city - a city that belongs to the American people - she ought to be ashamed for even suggesting them for consideration," the statement said on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, Mayor Muriel Bowser's office published a plan that recommends potentially removing the Washington Monument, Christopher Columbus Statue, Andrew Jackson Statue, Jefferson Memorial, Benjamin Franklin Statue, among others.

The White House said Trump believes these monuments should be preserved for generations to come.

As part of the protests that erupted with George Floyd's death in May, several monuments dedicated to controversial historical figures who took part in the American Civil War were removed either by the decision of local authorities or by the protesters themselves.

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US to Pursue Talks With Mexico About Concerns Over Food Imports - Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, September 1 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration has outlined a plan to help certain American farmers of season fruits and vegetables that are hurt by foreign imports and

will reach out to Mexico to discuss concerns, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) said in a press release.

"USTR will request the International Trade Commission to initiate a Section 201 global safeguard investigation into the extent to which increased imports of blueberries have caused serious injury to domestic blueberry growers," the release said on Tuesday.

In addition, the trade office will seek high-level talks with the government of Mexico in the next 90 days to address US concerns related to US imports of Mexican strawberries, bell peppers, and other season products.

The USTR will work with US producers to begin an investigation by the International Trade Commission to monitor the situation and possibly impose protective measures if needed later this year, the release said.

The Commerce Department, the release added, will establish a formal channel to provide information about unfair subsidies for foreign producers and exporters of seasonal and perishable fruits and vegetables, including those in Mexico.

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UPDATE 2 - FBI Refutes Claims of Foreign Cyber Attacks on US Voter Registration Databases - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation said in a joint statement that they have not seen any cyber attacks on voter registration databases and refuted claims of foreign meddling.

Russian newspaper Kommersant earlier in the day alleged that hackers had stolen and posted data from millions of US voters.

"CISA [The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency] and the FBI have not seen cyber attacks this year on voter registration databases or on any systems involving voting," both agencies said on Tuesday. "Information on US elections is going to grab headlines, particularly if it is cast as foreign interference. Early, unverified claims should be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism."

US state election officials, the release added, have correctly pointed out that a lot of voter registration data is publicly available or easily purchased.

CISA Director Chris Krebs in a tweet said that "it's going to be critical over the next few months to maintain our cool and not spin up over every claim. The last measure of resilience is the American Voter."

Kommersant also claimed that a Russian hackers' forum advertises access to data on millions of voters from the states of Connecticut, Arkansas, Florida and North Carolina as well as personal information of 62 thousand patients of a New York hospital.

Earlier in the day, US House Democrats sent a letter to National Intelligence Director John Ratcliffe demanding that the Trump administration revive regular briefings on election security. The Democrats said that the intelligence community confirmed publicly on August 7 that only one country, Russia, is actively undertaking measures to interfere in the election.

Russian officials have repeatedly denied allegations of election meddling as absurd fabrications politicians use to distract attention away from instances of legitimate corruption, fraud and other failings.

Last month, the State Department offered a \$10 million reward for information leading to the identification or location of any persons involved in foreign election meddling.

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Fewer People Will Attend US Presidential Debates Amid COVID-19 Restrictions - Organizers

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - US presidential debates organizers said that they will have a considerably smaller in-person audience at the events and need to revise a "town hall" format of one of them to meet coronavirus-induced restrictions.

The Republican incumbent Donald Trump and his Democratic rival Joe Biden are to meet at televised debates three times - on September 29, October 15 and 22. The only debate between their running mates, current Vice President Mike Pence and Senator Kamala Harris, is scheduled for October 7.

"The size of the audience will be considerably smaller that it has been in the past," a co-chair of the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) Kenneth Wollack said during an online briefing at The National Press Club.

The commission is yet to decide how to rearrange the town hall session which has an audience 50 or 100 people sitting in bleachers around both candidates and a moderator.

"It's clear that with social distancing and other protocols we are not going be able to do that," another CPD co-chair Frank Fahrenkopf said. "That's fluid. We haven't yet decided."

Because of the pandemic organizers had to change certain debate venues which are now Cleveland, Miami, Nashville and Salt Lake City for the Vice Presidential round. Each debate will run for 90 minutes without commercial breaks. CPD said that to introduce any amendment both candidates should agree on it and submit a joint motion for commission's consideration.

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FBI Refutes Claims of Foreign Cyber Attacks on US Voter Registration Databases - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation said in a joint statement that they have not seen any cyber attacks on voter registration databases and refuted claims of foreign meddling.

Russian newspaper Kommersant earlier in the day alleged that hackers had stolen and posted data from millions of US voters.

"CISA [The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency] and the FBI have not seen cyber attacks this year on voter registration databases or on any systems involving voting," both agencies said. "Information on US elections is going to grab headlines, particularly if it is cast as foreign interference. Early, unverified claims should be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism."

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US House Democrats Demand Trump Restore Election Security Briefings - Letter

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - US House Democrats sent a letter to National Intelligence Director John Ratcliffe demanding that the Trump administration revive regular briefings on election security.

"It is imperative for the IC [Intelligence Community] to disclose as much information as possible publicly... about our adversaries' aims, activities, and agents, as well as what the IC is doing to expose and thwart this interference," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Intelligence Committee Chair Adam Schiff and Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chair Peter Visclosky wrote in the letter.

"The IC confirmed publicly on August 7 that only one country- Russia - is actively undertaking a 'range of measures' to interfere in the election. Your decision, moreover, comes as the Congress itself is the target of a concerted effort by Russia to launder and amplify disinformation," the letter said.

Pelosi, Schiff and Visclosky also claimed in the letter that a "pro-Russia Ukrainian parliamentarian" was spreading false claims "to undermine former Vice President Biden's candidacy" and the Democratic Party.

Russia has repeatedly denied any interference in the US political system.

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Biden Promises to Turn Presidential Election Into US National Holiday

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - Joe Biden in a new campaign video said if he is elected president he will work hard to ensure election day becomes a US national holiday. "We're going to push hard to make... election day a national holiday," Biden said in the clip released on Tuesday.

Biden also said there should be same-day voter registration because the opposing side wants lower voter turnout.

President Donald Trump has been accused of trying to disrupt the postal service because he does not want voters to submit ballots through the mail. Some states are encouraging it due to COVID-19. The US presidential election is November 3.

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US Lifts Restrictions on Cyprus Non-Lethal Defense Exports, Imports - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - The US government is lifting restrictions related to the export and import of non-lethal defense articles to and from Cyprus, State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said.

"Secretary [Mike] Pompeo informed President [Nicos] Anastasiades of his decision to waive restrictions temporarily for FY [fiscal year] 2021 on the export, re-export, retransfer, and temporary import of non-lethal defense articles and defense services controlled under the International Traffic in Arms Regulation destined for or originating in Cyprus," Ortagus said in a statement on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, Pompeo praised Cyprus as a key US partner in the Eastern Mediterranean and announced that both nations are deepening their security cooperation.

The United States banned arms sales to Cyprus in 1987 to deescalate tensions and encourage a diplomatic solution to the conflict in the island. Cyprus has been de facto divided into the Republic of Cyprus and the non-recognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus since the 1970s, when Turkey sent troops to the island in response to an attempted coup by the Greek military and subsequently controls nearly 40 percent of the island's territory.

Last December, the US Congress voted to lift the 1987 arms embargo amid growing tensions sparked by Turkey's exploration drilling in the Greek-claimed waters in early August. Greece

considers this territory to be its exclusive economic zone and has mobilized its armed forces to high alert, vowing to protect its sovereign rights by all means necessary.

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Serbia-Kosovo Summit at White House to Push Economic Links, Avoid Politics - US Official

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - A meeting between leaders of Serbia and Kosovo at the White House this week will promote economic links between the Balkan nations in an attempt to bypass an intractable political dispute, a senior Trump administration official told reporters on condition of anonymity.

"Anybody who is a casual observer would realize that we're kind of stuck on political discussions and we keep kind of pounding the same issues over and over without much progress," the official said on Tuesday. "What President [Donald] Trump wanted to do was to see if a focus on economic development and job creation for young people could somehow change the dynamic of the situation."

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti are slated to meet at the White House on Thursday for talks hosted by US Special Envoy Richard Grenell, the White House said earlier.

It was unclear whether Trump would participate, the senior official said.

Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2008, nearly a decade after US-led military campaign against then SR Yugoslavia - comprising of Serbia and Montenegro - after they tried to quell an Albanian separatist uprising led by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) terrorist organization.

Serbia considers Kosovo and Metohia to be its territory - a fact recognized by United Nations Resolution 1244 - and refuses to recognize Kosovo's statehood.

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US Court Temporarily Blocks Release of Trump Tax Returns - Filing

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik) - A federal appeals court temporarily blocked a New York prosecutor from immediately obtaining President Donald Trump's tax records, court documents revealed.

"It is hereby ordered that a stay of the district court's order and judgement pending determination of the appeal is granted," Catherine O'Hagan Wolfe, Clerk of Court at the 2nd Circuit Court of appeals, said in a publicly-disseminated order on Tuesday.

Arguments on the case brought by Cy Vance, the Manhattan District Attorney in New York, will be heard on September 25, the order said.

Trump, who stands for reelection in November, has called the long-running quest for his financial records a "continuation of the most disgusting witch hunt in the history of our country". He has predicted the case would again end up before the Supreme Court, which has conservative judges more likely to rule in his favor.

The Supreme Court in an unexpected ruling last month said the presidency in itself does not shield Trump from Vance's investigation. The case was then forwarded to US District Judge Victor Marrero's courtroom to allow Trump's lawyers to raise other concerns about the subpoena.

Marrero ruled in Vance's favor even as Trump's lawyers argued that the subpoena was issued in bad faith and overly broad, might have been politically motivated and amounted to harassment.

Vance, a Democrat opposed to Trump, began seeking the Republican president's tax returns from his longtime accounting firm over a year ago, after Trump's former personal lawyer Michael Cohen told Congress that the president had misled tax officials, insurers and business associates about the value of his assets. Cohen was given a three-year jail sentence in 2018 to multiple financial crimes, lying to Congress, and to campaign finance violations related to hush money payments to two women who claim they had affairs with Trump.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 2 (Sputnik)

UN SNAPBACK SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN

- * None of the UN Security Council member states have introduced a resolution to continue sanctions relief with respect to Iran after the expiration of the deadline to do so, UN Security Council president for the month of September Abdou Abarry told reporters on Tuesday.
- * The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signatories unanimously refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the United States' initiation of the snapback sanctions mechanism against Iran, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.
- * The US administration denies common sense when attempting to re-impose UN sanctions on Iran, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

US-RUSSIA ARMS CONTROL NEGOTIATIONS

- * Russia does not share the optimism of the United States regarding imminent conclusion of agreements in the field of arms control, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Tuesday.
- * Russia does not yet see an unambiguous disposition of the United States to extend the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), Ryabkov said.

US, MOROCCO SIGN ENHANCED IMMUNITIES AGREEMENT

* The United States and Morocco have signed an Enhanced Immunities Agreement to extend the immunity the embassy staff enjoys to the consular officers and employees at the US Consulate General in Casablanca and the Moroccan Consulate General in New York, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Tuesday.

BELARUS DEVELOPMENTS

* Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Oleg Kravchenko and Charge d'Affaires at the US Embassy in Minsk Jeffrey Giauque discussed the post-election situation in the republic and relations between Minsk and Washington, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday.

* The United States is considering imposing sanctions on seven Belarusians for allegedly engaging in election fraud and violence against protesters, US media reported citing a senior State Department official.

* The United States may also consider imposing sanctions on Russia if it becomes more involved in Belarus' internal affairs, the report said.

* Russia does not interfere in the affairs of Belarus, but contributes to solving problems, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik.

TRUMP VISITS KENOSHA, APPROVES AID

* US President Donald Trump was greeted by large numbers of both protesters and supporters as he toured areas damaged in recent riots in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

* Trump announced over \$42 million in federal aid for law enforcement in Wisconsin, praising their work in quelling riots that erupted in Kenosha after police shot and severely wounded African-American Jacob Blake.

* Trump also said his administration has approved \$4 million for business owners in Kenosha whose premises were burned down or looted during the riots.

US SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS CENSOR RUSSIAN ACCOUNTS

* Facebook said in a statement on Tuesday that it has removed 13 allegedly Russia-linked accounts focused on affairs in the United States, the United Kingdom, Algeria and Egypt.

* Twitter said in a statement that it has removed five accounts for which it said are reliably linked to "Russian state actors" for platform manipulation.