

Wires 9/3/20

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US Southern States Police Association Endorses Trump - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - A police association with 60,000 members stretching across the US southern states endorsed President Donald Trump on Thursday, the organization said in a statement.

"Southern States Police Benevolent Association, Inc. (SSPBA) announced today that it is endorsing Donald Trump for President in the 2020 election," the release said. "This is the association's first presidential endorsement in over twenty years."

Vice President Mike Pence told the Southern States Police Benevolent Association (SSPBA) gathering at a "Cops for Trump" event at Raleigh-Durham International Airport in the US state of North Carolina said the Trump Administration knows "law enforcement is the solution, not the problem."

In his speech at Raleigh, Pence repeated Trump's pledge that he would never defund any police force in the United States.

The US has been engulfed by social unrest sparked by police-involved deaths of Black men including George Floyd in Minnesota in May and a recent shooting in Wisconsin that left a man paralyzed.

Earlier on Thursday, the mayor of Rochester, New York suspended police officers involved in the death of a black man in March. The move came after video released on Wednesday showed Daniel Prude, 41, die of asphyxiation during an arrest.

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Mayor of New York State's Rochester Suspends Police Officers Over Black Man's Death

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - Mayor of the US city of Rochester Lovely Warren announced on Thursday that she suspended police officers suspected of being involved in the death of a Black man while in custody in March.

"I am suspending the officers in question today against the advice of [the city] council, and I urge the Attorney General to complete her investigation. I understand that the union may sue the city for this, they shall feel free to do so," Warren said during a briefing.

On Wednesday, the Rochester Police Department released a disturbing video of body camera footage showing police officers apprehend Prude who was running naked through the streets at night. Media reported, according to Prude's family, that he died of asphyxiation on March 30 after several police officers pulled a hood over him and pinned him to the ground for two minutes.

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Biden Says He Met Blake Family in Kenosha, Talked With Wounded Son Over Phone

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden said during a meeting with community leaders in Kenosha, Wisconsin on Thursday that he spoke briefly with Jacob Blake Jr. on the telephone and met with several members of his family in person.

"I just spent an hour or more with the family as I got off the airplane, had an opportunity to spend some time with Jacob on the phone, he's out of ICU [Intensive Care Unit]," Biden said. A family attorney, Ben Crump, said in a statement earlier in the day that Blake's family was grateful for the meeting with Biden.

Crump added that Blake's family talked about the need for systemic reform, the disparate treatment of minorities in police interactions, including Biden's plans for change.

On Tuesday, President Donald Trump visited Kenosha, Wisconsin, and toured a section of the city damaged by rioting last week to promote his message of law and order.

Riots erupted in Kenosha after police shot responded to a domestic disturbance call and shot Blake seven times in the back, leaving him paralyzed from the shoulders down. According to the Kenosha Professional Police Association, Blake forcefully resisted arrest.

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Police Release Video of Wednesday Fatal Shooting of 18-Year-Old Black Man in US Capital

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US police released bodycam footage of an officer shooting a Black man during a pursuit in Washington, DC on Wednesday.

The shaky fast-paced video makes it hard to verify claims that the 18-year-old victim, Deon Kay, was armed during the encounter, but a couple of frames briefly captured an object in his right hand which resembles a handgun.

The bodycam, belonging to the shooter, shows the officer firing a single round from a handgun at Kay, who emerged from his right during the pursuit in a parking lot between residential buildings.

The policeman continued to chase on foot at least another suspect while Kay fell on the ground pressing. Kay was tended by other policemen and died at a hospital later.

Police said they found a gun they claim was in Kay's possession and another gun inside the vehicle he used with his mates.

The incident sparked peaceful protests by activists rallying in front of the 7th police station in Washington, DC on Wednesday night who then marched toward Mayor Muriel Bowser's home on Thursday morning.

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Cuomo Calls for Swift Probe Into Causes of Death of Black Man in Rochester Police Custody

NEW YORK, September 3 (Sputnik) - New York Governor Andrew Cuomo on Thursday called for an expeditious investigation into the death in police custody of African American man Daniel Prude.

On Wednesday, the Rochester Police Department released a body camera footage showing police officers apprehending Prude while he was running naked through the streets at night. "Last night, I watched the video of Daniel Prude's death in Rochester. What I saw was deeply disturbing and I demand answers," Cuomo said in a statement. "For the sake of Mr. Prude's family and the greater Rochester community, I am calling for this case to be concluded as expeditiously as possible."

Cuomo also said he expects the Rochester Police Department to provide full and timely cooperation so that the case can be investigated as soon as possible.

New York State Attorney General Letitia James said she is looking into the case as per the governor's expectations to get to the bottom of the case about the circumstances of Prude's death.

The media reported, according to Prude's family, that he died of asphyxiation on March 30 after several police officers pulled a hood over him and pinned him to the ground for two minutes.

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US Stock Indexes Plunge as Much as 5% on Worries Over Economic Recovery From COVID-19

NEW YORK, September 3 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street plunged on Thursday, with key indexes falling as much as 5 percent to reverse a recent trend of record highs amid worries that economic recovery from the novel coronavirus pandemic was stalling.

The tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite was the hardest hit index on the New York Stock Exchange, falling 5 percent on the day. The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, was next in line, settling down nearly 3.5 percent. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest stock index on the NYSE, lost 2.8 percent.

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US-Led Coalition Downsizes Program That Spent \$5Bln to Equip Anti-IS Fighters Since 2014

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The United States will attempt to maintain equipment and other supplies for local fighters battling pockets of remaining fighters of the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) in Syria and Iraq while scaling back aid that totaled more than \$5 billion since 2014, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) said in a press release on Thursday.

"The conditions-based investments for our security partners in Iraq and Syria gives them a significant edge over ISIS [Islamic State]," CJTF-OIR Commander Pat White said in the release. "Looking ahead, our partners will prioritize sustaining the recently fielded tactical equipment and forecasting requirements for critical supplies to keep pressure on ISIS remnants."

From 2014 to 2020, a US program spent more than \$5 billion to equip local fighters, much of it on items such as uniforms, body armor, machine guns and mine-resistant armored vehicles.

Some of the largest investments involved airfield and runway renovations, modular aircraft shelters, infantry training ranges, vehicles and weapons at Iraq's Camp Taji, recently abandoned by US forces in an exit that left more than \$300,000 worth of equipment and improvements in Iraqi hands.

Trump has signaled a desire to withdraw all US forces from Iraq and Syria, but US commanders continue to recommend leaving behind a contingent of Americans for an advisory role in the battle against remaining Islamic State fighters.

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Calls for Pardoning Snowden Grow After Court Rules NSA Surveillance Program Violated Law

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US Lawmakers and activists are calling for a pardon of whistleblower Edward Snowden after the government surveillance program that he exposed was ruled illegal by a federal court.

On Wednesday, the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit said it concluded that the government violated the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act ('FISA') when it collected the telephony metadata of millions of Americans.

"Edward @Snowden deserves a pardon from President @realDonaldTrump," Congressman Matt Gaetz said in a tweet on Thursday.

Journalist Glenn Greenwald, who was involved with publishing some of the information leaked by Snowden, followed with a tweet of his own saying that pardoning Snowden "now has support across an unusually wide ideological spectrum."

US Senator Rand Paul, Congressman Thomas Massie, the ACLU, Freedom of the Press, and EU parliamentarians are among those who support pardoning the whistleblower, Greenwald said.

Even though the ruling said the data collection program was illegal under the FISA law, the panel declined to rule on whether the effort violated the constitution because evidence from eavesdropping that prosecutors introduced in the trial did not affect the outcome, the ruling said.

Snowden, a former NSA contractor, released hundreds of thousands of classified documents prior to receiving asylum in Russia. In addition to exposing the US domestic surveillance program, Snowden's documents also illustrated the size and scope of US spying on other nations, including routine eavesdropping on world leaders, as well as attempts to uncover terrorist plots.

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Twitter Places Public Warning on 2 of Trump's Tweets About Mail-In Voting - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - Twitter has placed a warning on two of President Donald Trump's tweets that potentially encourage US citizens to vote twice in the November election, the company said in a statement on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Trump tweeted that US citizens should submit a mail-in ballot and then on Election Day head to the polls to ensure their vote is counted.

"We placed a public interest notice on two Tweets in this thread for violating our Civic Integrity Policy, specifically for encouraging people to potentially vote twice," the company statement said regarding Trump's tweets.

Twitter said Trump's tweets may be misleading because of the various voting laws in each US state, especially where voting twice may be illegal.

The company statement said Twitter users will be able to "Quote Tweet" Trump's tweets, but will not be able to "Like, Reply, or Retweet" them.

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Police Release Video of Fatal Shooting in US Capital

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The video makes it hard to verify claims that the victim, Deon Kay, 18 years old, was armed during the incident which sparked peaceful protests against police brutality.

The bodycam, belonging to a shooter - a white male policeman, shows the officer firing at Kay, who emerged from his right during the pursuit in a parking lot between residential buildings.

The policeman continued to chase on foot at least another suspect while Kay fell on the ground pressing hands on his chest. He was tended by other policemen and died at a hospital later.

Police said they found a gun they say was in Kay's possession, and another gun inside the vehicle he used with his mates.

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Canadian Opposition Seeks Wider Probe Into Family Member Lobbying Trudeau Cabinet - Letter

TORONTO, September 3 (Sputnik) - Canada's official opposition party is seeking an expanded lobbying probe into the husband of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's chief of staff amid reports he lobbied parts of the cabinet for changes to a government program for the benefit of his company, the Conservative Party said in a press release on Thursday.

Last month, multiple outlets reported that Rob Silver, the husband of Trudeau's Chief of Staff Katie Telford, who is not a registered lobbyist, had unregistered conversations with both the Prime Minister's Office and the office of former Finance Minister Bill Morneau's in an effort to change the \$51-billion wage subsidy program on behalf of his company, MCAP, which was initially ineligible for the government contract.

"Commissioner, we are inquiring if the available public information on this matter provides cause for your office to open a second assessment into the unregistered communications between Mr. Silver, the Prime Minister's Office and former Finance Minister's Office on amending the wage subsidy program in order for MCAP to qualify," the letter said.

The letter to Canada's Lobbying Commissioner Nancy Belanger states that earlier correspondence between the authors of the letter, Shadow Minister of Finance Pierre Poilievre and Shadow Minister for Ethics Michael Barrett, and Belanger indicates that a preliminary investigation into alleged lobbying by Silver, in the awarding of a \$64-million government subcontract to MCAP, is underway.

According to the reports, Silver, the Senior Vice President of Strategy, Policy and Risk at MCAP, sought to ensure that MCAP would be eligible for the emergency wage subsidy program and even requested specific legislative amendments to the lucrative government program as part of his endeavor.

A potential second investigation into Silver's alleged lobbying of the Trudeau government, would be an additional blow to the prime minister after a scandal-fueled summer.

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 has sparked outrage. The scandal also forced the resignation of Morneau, who faced mounting backlash following his admission that he accepted expense paid trips from the WE Charity.

There are currently multiple investigations ongoing related to the Prime Minister and his government. Trudeau is the subject of a conflict of interest probe by the Canada's Ethics Commissioner into his relationship with the embattled charity – the third during his five years in office.

Concurrently, there are a number of parliamentary investigations concerning the awarding of the multi-billion-dollar government to the WE Charity that have been halted after Trudeau shut down parliament until the end of September, which the opposition has said smacks of a cover-up.

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Four Democrat Mayors Say Trump's Political Attacks 'Unlawful, Unconstitutional'

NEW YORK, September 3 (Sputnik) - Four Democratic mayors - Bill de Blasio of New York City, Ted Wheeler of Portland, Jenny Durkan of Seattle and Muriel Bowser of Washington, DC - said in a statement on Thursday that President Donald Trump's political attacks against their cities are unlawful and unconstitutional.

"Our cities... are not President Trump's political pawns," the statement said. "We are confronting unprecedented challenges - fighting back a pandemic and economic devastation without another stimulus. Now, instead of leadership from the White House, we are faced with new attacks that are unlawful, unconstitutional and will be undoubtedly defeated in court."

Trump has been very critical of the four mayors - as well as of other Democratic mayors - for allowing violent protests and riots to fester for three months while refusing his offers for federal assistance to quell unrest. On several occasions, Trump suggested that he would send federal law enforcement and the National Guard if the mayors do not prevent violence and the destruction of property.

The mayors did not specify or provide details about the potential legal action they may take against the US president. Their remarks, however, came on the heels of a bill introduced in Congress that would make individuals charged with violence, looting, arson and vandalism ineligible for coronavirus unemployment benefits. The Support Peaceful Protest Act, sponsored by Republican Congressman Jim Banks, would also make rioters financially liable for the cost of federal policing.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, responding to the Trump administration's threat to potentially withdraw federal funds from what it calls anarchist municipalities like New York City, said the US president was not welcome in the city and would need an army to protect him if he decided to visit.

New York Attorney General Letitia James said in a separate statement she would take immediate legal action if the Trump administration continues to threaten to withhold federal funds to New York City.

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Kenosha Lists 252 Arrests Over Past Two Weeks - Sheriff's Department

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The US state of Wisconsin's Kenosha County has recorded just over 250 arrests since August 23 of continuing protests over the shooting seven times in the back of unarmed African-American Jacob Blake, the Sheriff's Department said on Thursday.

"As of today, September 3, 2020, Kenosha County has gone eight days and nights with relatively peaceful activity," the department said in a release. "A situational update for the civil unrest includes the following statistics from August 23 through September 3. "Total arrests = 252."

More than half of those arrests over the past two weeks of protests have been of individuals that do not live in Kenosha County numbering 132 in all, the Sheriff's Department noted.

During that time Kenosha City suffered \$1.95 million in property damage and the remainder of the county \$385,000, the release added.

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden is visiting Kenosha on Thursday and is due to meet Blake's father. His visit comes 48 hours after President Donald Trump visited the city of 100,000 people, which is on the shores of Lake Michigan in the south of the state.

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US Government to Pursue Domestic Terrorism Charges Against Antifa - White House

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The US government will press domestic terrorism charges against Antifa activists blamed for instigating violence during anti-racism protests across the country, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said on Thursday.

"They [Department of Justice] will be pursuing domestic terrorism charges against Antifa individuals - anarchists who are wrecking havoc across our country," McEnany said during a briefing.

The US administration has repeatedly accused Antifa, a decentralized and predominantly white anarchist movement, of hijacking protests against police brutality and racism which started in numerous US cities after the death of African American George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25.

McEnany said that an Antifa activist is a suspect in a killing of a man in Portland who is described as a right-wing counter-protester supporting US President Donald Trump. The shooting occurred in downtown last Saturday.

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Canadian Advertising Watchdog Says Telecom Giant Misrepresented Pricing Claims

TORONTO, September 3 (Sputnik) - Canadian telecommunications giant Telus misrepresented pricing claims during an advertising campaign earlier this year, an industry self-regulatory body ruled on Thursday.

Telus, in a full-page ad in newspapers earlier this year, claimed that Canadians spend less on wireless services than Americans and that "it's a myth that Canadians pay some of the highest wireless prices in the world." The latter claim still appears on the company website to this day. "There was no support in the cited study for the claim that it is a myth Canadians pay some of the highest prices in the world for wireless," Advertising Standards Canada said in a statement. The body justified its ruling saying that Telus' ad "incorrectly conflated affordability and pricing" and that its claims were based on a study that included only four countries.

The self-governing body did approve the claim that "Canadians spend less on wireless than Americans," which was initially based on a PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) Canada study. Canadians have frequently cited excessive wireless prices as an area of concern. Despite the PWC study finding that Canadians spend less than Americans and Australians on wireless services, a Visual Capitalist report ranked Canada 146th in the world for price of 1 GB of data.

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White House Says FDA Not Pressured to Approve COVID-19 Vaccine Before November Vote

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Kayleigh McEnany told reporters on Thursday that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is not being pressured by anybody to approve a novel coronavirus vaccine before the upcoming November 3 presidential elections as has been alleged by the mainstream media.

"No one is pressuring the FDA to do anything," McEnany said. "This is again a bizarre theory spun up by CNN among others."

McEnany said US President Donald Trump wants to break through the regulatory barriers so that a vaccine can be produced and provided to the American people as quickly as possible. "But he will not in any way sacrifice safety and making sure that is 100 percent airtight for the American people to receive it," McEnany said. "So, the priority here is saving lives, safety, and there will be a safe and effective vaccine in the works."

On Sunday, FDA head Stephen Hahn said in an interview the agency is ready to authorize a coronavirus vaccine before the end of phase 3 clinical trials if such a move proves to bring more benefits than risks.

Hahn also said FDA's authorization for the emergency use of a potential vaccine did not equal full approval. FDA's decisions would be based on science and medicine and not on politics or the upcoming election, he added.

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White House Says Confident Will Get Funding to Avoid Gov't Shutdown at End of September

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said during a press briefing on Thursday that the executive office believes a government shutdown will be avoided at the end of the month.

"We do believe that we'll be able to get funding to avoid a shutdown," McEnany said.

The Press Secretary noted that White House officials have already started discussing the issue but added that she has no details on whether negotiations have started with congressional leaders.

The current spending bill expires on September 30 and both chambers of Congress reconvene on September 8.

The last government shutdown albeit a partial one, occurred between late December 2018 and late January 2019.

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Pompeo Discusses Cooperation in NATO With Estonia Prime Minister - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo discussed with Estonian Prime Minister Juri Ratas the two states' partnership within NATO and other international organizations, Department of State spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a statement on Thursday.

"Secretary Pompeo and Prime Minister Ratas discussed the importance of the US-Estonian partnership within the NATO alliance and international organizations," Ortagus said.

Pompeo expressed gratitude to Estonia for its leadership on the Three Seas Initiative that he characterized as "an effort that will contribute to economic growth and energy security in Europe."

The Three Seas Initiative is a top-level forum of 12 European states established in 2015 with a declared goal to expand cross-border cooperation in energy, transportation, digital infrastructure and other economic fields in the area between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas.

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US Charges 19 Non-Citizens With Illegally Voting in 2016 Elections - Immigration Agency

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - Nineteen immigrants face charges of voting illegally in the national elections in the United States because they were not US citizens, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency said in a press release on Thursday.

"These charges are the latest indictments to result from an ongoing years-long federal criminal investigation being conducted by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI)," in the state of North Carolina, the release said.

Seven of the defendants face felony charges for lying on voter registration forms while the remaining 12 are charged with misdemeanors for casting ballots, the release said.

President Donald Trump and others have claimed that US elections are subject to fraud on a massive scale, big enough to alter election outcomes, especially with the practice of mail-in voting.

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Serbia, Kosovo Leaders 'Making Progress' in Talks on Economy at White House - NSC

(Updates with details in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The leaders of Serbia and Kosovo are making progress on economic issues on the first day of their two-day summit at the White House, US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said in a statement on Thursday.

"The leaders of Serbia and Kosovo are already making progress," O'Brien said. "Our conversations this morning centered on bolstering economic ties and economic normalization. Looking forward to further discussion this afternoon."

Serbia's Labor and Employment Minister Zoran Djordjevic told Sputnik that the economic talks would include infrastructure projects and the free flow of goods, capital and people. The minister said this week's meetings represent a step forward, especially if agreements are reached, and more could be held in the future.

Djordjevic mentioned that Serbia will not discuss during the summit the issue of territories because such talks require the participation of the United Nations, Russia and the European Union.

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

Kosovo has since experienced ethnic cleansing of its non-Albanian population - including Serbs, Macedonians and others - and has become a one of the world's leading organized crime hubs.

Moreover, the Kosovo Albanians have aided the overall Albanian territorial designs on neighboring Macedonia and Montenegro for the creation of "Greater Albania." 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 Military Selects 5 New Sites for Next Phase COVID-19 Vaccine Trials - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The US military has chosen five treatment facilities located in and around Washington, DC, San Antonio, Texas and San Diego, California to carry out the advanced testing phase for a new coronavirus vaccine, the Department of Defense said in a press release on Thursday.

"As part of the Operation Warp Speed (OWS) goal to deliver safe and effective vaccines and therapeutics by January 2021, five [Defense Department] locations have been identified to participate in the Phase III trial evaluating the vaccine candidate AZD1222 under development by AstraZeneca," the release said.

The Defense Department said the sites selected are the Naval Medical Center in San Diego, the Joint Base San Antonio Brooke Army Medical Center, Wilford Hall Ambulatory Surgical Center in San Antonio, Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda and Fort Belvoir Community Hospital in Virginia.

"Now that vaccines have passed the first phases of testing for safety, dosing and response, we are ready to move into the next phase where volunteers are needed to join large clinical studies," Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs Tom McCaffery said in the release. The study is looking for volunteers to take the vaccine, especially from those working in the so-called essential jobs, the release said.

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Serbia, Kosovo Leaders Discussing Trade, Projects During White House Talks - Minister

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti are discussing infrastructure projects, trade and free flow of goods and capital during talks that just kicked off at the White House, Serbian Labor and Employment Minister Zoran Djordjevic told Sputnik.

"This time, specific projects will actually be the subject of discussion, and infrastructure projects, as well as trade and free flow of capital, goods and people, will certainly be a priority," Djordjevic said on Thursday.

Djordjevic added that the meeting at the White House will be a step forward in resolving political issues if agreements on the economy are reached.

"I think that the economy is more important at the moment and achieving results in this area increases the chances of a future agreement on unresolved political issues for which President Vucic has the support of the government of the Republic of Serbia," Djordjevic said.

The Serbian minister explained the series of meetings in Washington, planned at the initiative of the Trump administration regarding continuing dialogue with the interim Kosovo authorities, represents a continuation of attempts to find a solution to the perennial problems that would be acceptable to both sides and applicable in the daily life of the people in Kosovo and Metohia. Djordjevic emphasized that Serbia will not discuss during the White House meeting the issue of territories because such discussions require the participation of the United Nations, Russia and the European Union.

"A priority will be given to economic issues, that is, the economy and its practical application in the reality of current relations and I do not believe that there is something broader on the agenda, even territorial or status issues," Djordjevic said.

However, Djordjevic said he does not exclude such a possibility if the political and other conditions are met by the international community, including the opinion of the UN Security Council permanent member states as well as EU member states.

"Of course, in all this the opinion of the Russian Federation and President Putin, as well as the position of our Chinese friends, is inevitable," Djordjevic said.

Commenting on the possibility that US president may be present during the talks, Djordjevic said, "The question of the presence of US President Donald Trump at these negotiations is unknown, but I don't exclude it, depending on the degree of agreement reached and the quality of the agreements reached."

Djordjevic said the meeting represents a step forward and such meetings will likely be held in the future as well.

"I don't think these meetings are so important that they represent the last and decisive word that Serbia and the interim Kosovar organizations should say to each other. I think this is a process that will continue, but in any case, it is a step forward and leads to a solution in the future," he said.

US policymakers said they hope the White House-hosted summit will focus on building new economic ties between the two adversaries while avoiding the many contentious unresolved political issues between them.

Earlier in the week, a senior Trump administration official said the US president wants to foster conditions for economic growth and increased opportunities for young people that will generate a new sense of prosperity and willingness to move ahead from the sterile conflicts of the past. Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, nearly a decade after a US-led military campaign against the then SR Yugoslavia - comprised of Serbia and Montenegro - was undertaken after Belgrade tried to quell an Albanian separatist uprising led by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) terrorist organization.

Kosovo has since experienced ethnic cleansing of its non-Albanian population - including Serbs, Macedonians and others - and has become a one of the key international organized crime hubs. Moreover, the Kosovo Albanians have aided the overall Albanian territorial designs on neighboring Macedonia and Montenegro for the creation of "Greater Albania."

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Serbia, Kosovo Leaders 'Making Progress' in Talks on Economy at White House - US Official

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The leaders of Serbia and Kosovo are making progress on economic issues on the first day of their two-day summit at the White House, US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said in a statement on Thursday. "The leaders of Serbia and Kosovo are already making progress," O'Brien said. "Our conversations this morning centered on bolstering economic ties and economic normalization. Looking forward to further discussion this afternoon."

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Tikhanovskaya Will Participate in UNSC Meeting on Belarus Friday - President's Office

UNITED NATIONS, September 3 (Sputnik) - Former presidential candidate in Belarus Svetlana Tikhanovskaya will participate in the UN Security Council meeting on the situation in the country on Friday, Niger's Mission to the United Nations, which presides over the Security Council during this month of September, told Sputnik. "The meeting will take place on Friday, September 4, 2020, via video conference at 10:00 a.m. Ms. [Tikhanovskaya], Belarusian opposition presidential candidate, will brief the Council," the mission said on Thursday.

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US Election Officer Warns Americans Against Double Voting After Trump Remarks

WASHINGTON, Sept 3 (Sputnik) - A senior elections officer in the US state of North Carolina on Thursday reminded Americans that it was illegal for them to vote twice in an election after President Donald Trump urged them to turn up physically at voting centers as well, after mailing in their ballots for November's presidential contest. "It is illegal to vote twice in an election," North Carolina State Board of Elections Executive Director Karen Brinson Bell said in a statement regarding Trump's remarks. "[It is] a felony for a voter, with intent to commit a fraud to register or vote at more than one precinct or more than one time... in the same primary or election." Trump, when asked about the security of mail-in votes during an interview with WECT-TV in Wilmington, North Carolina, on Wednesday, said: "Let them send it in and let them go vote."

And if the system is as good as they say it is then obviously they won't be able to vote" in person.

Polls show Republican Trump trailing his Democrat challenger Joe Biden in the presidential election slated for November 3, and the president has repeatedly railed against voting by mail, which he calls a fraudulent process despite its long practice in America. Tens of millions of Americans are expected to vote by mail this year, instead of in-person, due to fears over the coronavirus outbreak.

Trump attempted to clarify his remarks on Thursday, saying on Twitter that what he meant was people who mailed in their ballots should turn up in person at voting centers as well to verify that their vote had been received and counted. White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany, appearing on Fox Television, also refuted suggestions that Trump was trying to encourage double voting.

Bell, the North Carolina election board official, however, said there were "numerous checks in place in North Carolina that prevent people from double voting".

She also said there was no need for voters to leave their homes in the middle of the pandemic to verify their ballots, adding that they could do the same with online tools such as the State Board's Voter Search Tool or BallotTrax.

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UN Human Rights Experts Deeply Concerned by Violence Against Women in Belarus - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, September 3 (Sputnik) - The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) said in a statement on Thursday it is deeply concerned by the reports of sexual and gender-based violence against women in Belarus amid the ongoing post-presidential election protests.

"The CEDAW Committee supports women's democratic voices and peaceful political participation. It therefore expresses its concern regarding recent developments in Belarus and reported instances of sexual and gender-based violence, including threats of sexual assault, against women human rights defenders and women political activists," the statement said.

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Canada Surpasses 130,000 COVID-19 Cases, 9,135 Deaths Reported - Health Agencies

TORONTO, September 3 (Sputnik) - The number of COVID-19 cases in Canada has surpassed 130,000 with 9,135 deaths reported, government data revealed on Thursday.

A combined 319 new cases in Ontario and Quebec pushed Canada's tally to 130,242, according to data released by provincial health agencies.

According to Canada's public health agency, there are 5,738 active cases throughout the country.

Laboratories across Canada have tested more than 5.5 million people as of September 2 and 115,050 - or 88 percent - of infected individuals have recovered.

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US Imposes New Sanctions Targeting Iran's Petrochemical Sector - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated three individuals and 11 entities in Iran, China and the United Arab Emirates as part of new sanctions targeting Iran's petrochemical sector, the Treasury Department said in a press release on Thursday. "Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated six entities for their support to Triliance Petrochemical Co. Ltd. (Triliance), an entity designated by Treasury in January 2020, and related activities," the release said. "These entities, based in Iran, UAE, and China, support Triliance's continued involvement in the sale of Iranian petrochemical products, including efforts by Triliance to hide or otherwise obscure its involvement in sales contracts."

The release added that the State Department has imposed sanctions on three individuals and five entities for engaging in the shipment or sale of Iranian petrochemicals.

The entities designated by the Treasury Department include Iranian company Zagros Petrochemical Company; UAE-based entities Petrotech FZE and Trio Energy DMCC; and China-based entities Jingho Technology Co. Limited, Dynapex Energy Limited and Dinrin Limited.

The entities sanctioned by the State Department are Iran-based Abadan Refining Company; China-based entities Zhihang Ship Management CO Ltd., New Far International Logistics LLC and Sino Energy Shipping Ltd.; and UAE-based company Chemtrans Petrochemicals Trading LLC.

The three individuals sanctioned by the State Department include New Far employee Min Shi, Sino Energy employee Zuoyou Lin, and Abadan employee Alireza Amin.

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Serbia Will Not Discuss Territories Issue With Kosovo During Washington Meeting - Minister

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - Serbia will not discuss during the White House meeting the issue of territories as it requires the participation of the United Nations, Russia and the European Union, Labor and Employment Minister Zoran Djordjevic told Sputnik on Thursday.

"A priority will be given to economic issues, that is, the economy and its practical application in the reality of current relations and I do not believe that there is something broader on the agenda, even territorial or status issues," Djordjevic said.

However, Djordjevic said he does not exclude such a possibility if the political and other conditions are met by the international community, including the opinion of the UN Security Council permanent members as well as the EU countries.

"Of course, in all this the opinion of the Russian Federation and President Putin, as well as the position of our Chinese friends, is inevitable," Djordjevic said.

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Serbia-Kosovo Talks in US May Boost Chances of Resolving Political Issues - Labor Minister

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The meeting between Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti at the White House will be a step forward in resolving political issues if agreements on the economy are reached, Labor Minister Zoran Djordjevic told Sputnik on Thursday.

"I think that the economy is more important at the moment, and that achieving results in this area increases the chances of a future agreement on unresolved political issues, for which President Aleksandar Vucic has the support of the Government of the Republic of Serbia," Djordjevic said.

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Serbia, Kosovo Leaders to Discuss Trade, Projects During White House Talks - Minister

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti will talk about infrastructure projects, trade and free flow of goods and capital during the talks that just kicked off at the White House, Serbian Labor and Employment Minister Zoran Djordjevic told Sputnik.

"This time, specific projects will actually be the subject of discussion, and infrastructure projects, as well as trade and free flow of capital, goods and people, will certainly be a priority," Djordjevic said on Thursday..

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Trump's Presence at Serbia-Kosovo Talks Depends on Reached Agreements - Serbian Minister

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump's participation in the talks between Kosovar and Serbian leaders at the White House will depend on the level of agreements that would be reached, Minister of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs Zoran Djordjevic told Sputnik on Thursday.

"The question of the presence of US President Donald Trump at these negotiations is unknown, but I do not exclude it, depending on the degree of agreement reached and the quality of the agreements reached," Djordjevic said.

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US Urges 'Normalization' as Serbia, Kosovo Leaders Arrive for Talks - White House

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to help Serbia and Kosovo achieve regular economic relations as Serbian President Alexander Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti arrived at the White House for talks, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said on Thursday.

"President Vucic and Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti just arrived at the White House for today's Serbia-Kosovo talks," O'Brien said via Twitter. "The United States is ready to facilitate economic normalization!"

Vucic has made clear Serbia would not consider the possibility of recognizing Kosovo's independence.

Belgrade considers Kosovo and Metohia to be Serbian lands - a fact recognized in United Nations resolution 1244.

Privately, US officials acknowledge that no progress has been made on any major political dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, hence their hopes that they can help generate a new and more constructive willingness to work together by focusing on economic cooperation.

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Democrats Urge Mnuchin to Sanction Russia for Seeking to Interfere in US Election - Letter

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - Congressional Democrats on Thursday sent a letter to Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin urging him to impose right away additional sanctions against Russia over the country's alleged plans to interfere in the upcoming US election.

"We write to urge you immediately to impose sanctions on individuals, entities and governmental actors seeking to interfere in the 2020 US election," the letter said.

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Maduro Government's Prisoner Release Does Not Solve Political Crisis in Venezuela - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The United States believes the recent release of a number of political prisoners in Venezuela does not solve the political crisis in the country nor it changes the fact that there are no conditions for free and fair elections, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Thursday.

On Monday, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro pardoned 110 citizens, more than 20 of whom are opposition lawmakers.

"The Maduro regime's announcement of conditional dismissal of criminal charges against roughly one-third of the political prisoners it holds does not solve, nor even address, Venezuela's underlying political crisis," Pompeo said. "Conditions for free and fair elections do not exist in Venezuela and the release of a number of political prisoners does not change that."

Pompeo noted that hundreds of political prisoners still remain under arrest in Venezuela and members of the country's opposition continue to be harassed and threatened.

Many opponents to the Maduro government are prohibited from running for office and the National Electoral Commission is under the government control, Pompeo said.

The United States and the international community will not contribute to permitting yet another electoral fraud in Venezuela and are urging all democratic actors to insist on the internationally accepted standards for free and fair elections.

The US State Department has urged its partners to reject the results of the upcoming parliamentary elections in Venezuela scheduled for December 6.

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US Democrats Demand Probe into Alleged Hatch Act Violations at Trump Convention - Letter

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US Democrats have sent a letter to the Office of Special Counsel (OSC) demanding it investigate many alleged violations of the Hatch Act at the Republican National Convention, the House Committee on Oversight and Reform said in a press release on Thursday.

"Throughout the convention, administration officials repeatedly used their official positions and the White House itself to bolster President [Donald] Trump's reelection campaign," the letter said. "We are alarmed that President Trump and some senior administration officials are actively undermining compliance with - and respect for - the law."

The US Office of Special Counsel is an independent federal agency that is responsible for investigating and enforcing violations of the Hatch Act, which bans Executive agency employees from participating in certain political campaign activities, Beyer said.

The letter was signed by Committee Chair Carolyn Maloney, National Security Subcommittee Chair Stephen Lynch, Government Operations Subcommittee Chair Gerald Connolly and Committee Member Stacey Plaskett, the release said.

"Numerous Administration officials used their official positions and government property and resources for partisan political purposes during the Convention," the release said.

These included a convention speech by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo while he was on official travel abroad and multiple segments filmed on federal property, including Trump speaking with former hostages and people impacted by COVID-19, the release added.

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US to Start Recalling Officials From WHO, Redirecting Funds Ahead of Pullout - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The United States will start recalling its representatives and reducing its engagement with the World Health Organization (WHO) ahead of its planned pullout on July 6 next year, State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus announced in a statement on Thursday.

"Today, the United States is announcing the next steps with respect to our withdrawal from the WHO and the redirection of American resources. This redirection includes reprogramming the remaining balance of its planned Fiscal Year 2020 assessed WHO contributions to partially pay other UN assessments," Ortagus said. "In addition, through July 2021, the United States will scale down its engagement with the WHO, to include recalling the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) detailees from WHO headquarters, regional offices, and country offices,

and reassigning these experts. US participation in WHO technical meetings and events will be determined on a case-by-case basis."

In July, the United States formally notified the WHO of its withdrawal effective July 6, 2021.

Ortagus said Washington had been working to identify partners to assume the activities previously undertaken by WHO.

"When President Trump announced the US withdrawal from that organization, he made clear that we would seek more credible and transparent partners," she added.

The United States pulled out of the WHO earlier this year after claiming the body helped China conceal information about the origins of the novel coronavirus. The WHO said its January 30 emergency declaration gave the United States sufficient time to prepare while Beijing said it had been transparent about the virus's origins.

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US Arrests Over 2,000 in 2-Month 'Operation Legend' Crackdown on Crime - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) – Law enforcement officers in the United States have arrested more than 2,000 violent criminals in just under two months since announcing a nationwide crackdown in early July, the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"Since the operation's [July 8] launch, through Monday, August 31, 2020, more than 2000 arrests – included 147 for homicide – have been made; more than 544 firearms have been seized; and more than seven kilos of fentanyl, 14 kilos of heroin, 12 kilos of cocaine, and 50 kilos of methamphetamine have been seized," the release said.

Of those individuals arrested, 476 have been charged with federal offenses, including 249 with firearms-related crimes, 185 with drug-related crimes and the remainder charged with "various offenses," the release said.

The release described the initiative, named "Operation Legend," as a sustained, systematic and coordinated law enforcement initiative in which federal law enforcement agencies work in conjunction with state and local law enforcement officials to fight violent crime.

The release listed major US cities where arrests were made, including Chicago, which topped the list with 102 arrests followed by Kansas City with 99 arrests.

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US Sees Another 881,000 Weekly Jobless Claims as COVID-19 Fallout Continues - Labor Dept.

(Adds weekly claims' trends and background on economy versus jobs' recovery in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - Some 881,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, the Labor Department said on Thursday, as the labor market continued to struggle five months into the coronavirus pandemic..

"In the week ending August 29, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 881,000, a decrease of 130,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a news release.

In the previous week to August 22, there were 1,011,000 new filings for jobless benefits. Continuous claims for the latest week showed filings from 13.25 million Americans, down from the previous week's revised number of 14 million.

The figures marked the first decline in three weeks for jobless claims to below the 1 million mark. As for continuous claims, it was the sixth straight weekly decline.

US economic recovery from the COVID-19 has been mixed with employment rebounding by about 10 million jobs over the past three months, after a loss of more than 21 million jobs between March and April.

But the economy itself shrank by a record 32.9 percent in the three months to June, adding to the 5 percent contraction in the first quarter, as business lockdowns forced by the pandemic took a toll on growth.

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US Trade Gap at \$63.6 Billion in July - Commerce Dept

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The US trade gap stood at \$63.6 billion in July, rising by just over \$10 billion from June levels, the Commerce Department said in data published Thursday that showed a decline in the nation's exports-imports situation amid mixed economic progress made since the height of the coronavirus crisis.

"The goods and services deficit was \$63.6 billion in July, up \$10.1 billion from \$53.5 billion in June, revised," the department said in a news release.

A slower growth in exports versus imports led to the larger trade deficit, data showed.

Exports for July stood at \$168.1 billion, or \$12.6 billion above that in June.

But imports totaled \$231.7 billion, or \$22.7 billion more than the previous month.

US economic recovery from the COVID-19 has been mixed with employment rebounding by about 10 million jobs over the past three months, after a loss of more than 21 million jobs between March and April. But the economy itself shrank by a record 32.9 percent in the three months to June, adding to the 5 percent contraction in the first quarter, as business lockdowns forced by the pandemic took a toll on growth.

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Facebook Plans to Block All Political Ads in Week Before US Election – Zuckerberg

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) – Political advertising will disappear from Facebook during the week prior to November 3 elections, one of several steps to ensure integrity of the upcoming vote, the social media platform's CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced in a press release on Thursday.

"We won't accept new political ads in the week before the election," Zuckerberg said.

The release detailed a number of additional steps that Zuckerberg said were intended "to help secure the integrity of the US elections by encouraging voting, connecting people to authoritative information, and reducing the risks of post-election confusion."

Other measures include removal of posts claiming people will get COVID-19 if they take part in voting. The platform will also add links with "authoritative information" about COVID-19 to other posts that could be interpreted as discouraging voting due to the pandemic, the release said.

In addition, Facebook will add an informational label to content that seeks to delegitimize the outcome of the election or discuss the legitimacy of voting methods, for example, by claiming that lawful methods of voting will lead to fraud, the release said.

Finally, Facebook will target any message from a candidate that declares victory before final results are announced, by attaching a link directing users to sites that display official results, according to the release.

The measures reflect an attempt to avoid a repeat of Facebook's role in the 2016 US election as a platform for nefarious users to amplify false or misleading information about candidates.

One of the most prominent examples in 2016 involved the spread on social media of a bogus claim that the pope had endorsed then-candidate President Donald Trump over Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton.

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US Sees Another 881,000 Weekly Jobless Claims as COVID-19 Fallout Continues - Labor Dept.

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"In the week ending August 29, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 881,000, a decrease of 130,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a news release. In the previous week to August 22, there were 1,011,000 new filings for jobless benefits. Continuous claims for the latest week showed filings from 13.25 million Americans, down from the previous week's revised number of 14 million.

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US Envoy Asks Kosovo, Serbia Leaders to 'Put Politics Aside' as Talks Begin in Washington

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy Richard Grenell on Thursday urged the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo to put politics aside as both were set to arrive to Washington ahead of meetings at the White House this week.

"The people of Kosovo and Serbia deserve economic normalization and the chance to create a vibrant economy. Today I am focused on the young people who want a career, a good job and a connection to the West," Grenell said via Twitter. "I've heard you. And I will push hard for you. Let's put politics aside!"

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti are due to arrive in Washington on Thursday and are slated to meet at the White House on Friday for talks, the White House said earlier.

US policymakers hope the White House-hosted summit will focus on building new economic ties between the two adversaries and avoid the many contentious unresolved political issues between them.

US President Donald Trump wanted to foster conditions of economic growth and increased opportunities for young people that would generate a new sense of prosperity and willingness to move ahead from the sterile conflicts of the past, a senior official told reporters earlier in the week.

However, it remains unclear whether Trump will personally participate in the talks, the senior official said.

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

Kosovo has since experienced ethnic cleansing of its non-Albanian population - including Serbs, Macedonians and others - and has become a key international organized crime hub for the distribution of drugs and other contraband. Moreover, the Kosovo Albanians have aided the overall Albanian territorial designs on neighboring Macedonia and Montenegro for the creation of "Greater Albania."

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

Vucic has made clear that Belgrade would not consider the possibility of recognizing Kosovo's independence at the meeting in Washington.

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RPT: PREVIEW - US Wants Serbia-Kosovo Summit to Push Economic Ties, Play Down Deadlock

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US policymakers hope the White House-hosted summit on Thursday and Friday between Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti will focus on building new economic ties between the two adversaries and avoid the many contentious unresolved political issues between them.

"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," a senior Trump administration official told reporters.

US President Donald Trump wanted to foster conditions of economic growth and increased opportunities for young people that would generate a new sense of prosperity and willingness to move ahead from the sterile conflicts of the past, the senior official explained.

"What President 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," the senior official said.

Vucic and Hoti are slated to meet at the White House on Thursday for talks hosted by US Special Envoy Richard Grenell, the White House said.

However, it remained unclear whether Trump would participate, the senior official said.

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

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

Vucic has made clear that Belgrade would not consider the possibility of recognizing Kosovo's independence at the meeting in Washington.

POLITICAL DEADLOCK

Privately, US officials acknowledge that no progress has been on any major political dispute between Serbia and the Kosovo Albanians, hence their hopes that they can help generate a new more constructive willingness to work together on both sides by focusing on economic cooperation.

With only two months to go before the US presidential elections on November 3, critics, especially in the European Commission in Brussels and among major European Union nations have said they believe Trump wants to give the illusion of both progress and hands-on US involvement.

However, the real, continued heavy lifting seeking to find an eventual settlement between the two disputing parties continues to be done by the Europeans centered in Brussels, they say. The European Union has continually pressured and conditioned Serbia to give up its ownership of Kosovo and to recognize its statehood.

US officials counter that Trump administration Special Envoy Grinnell has at least brought Vucic and Hoti face to face in Washington and has previously pressured Albanians to give up their draconian taxing and other policies on Serbian goods.

In any case, Brussels is set to host a new round of high-level negotiations between the two sides next Monday with the participation of the European Union's top diplomat and special envoy for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, the EU diplomatic office said on Wednesday.

"On Monday 7 September, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, and the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues, Miroslav Lajcak, will host the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, and the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Avdullah Hoti, for another high-level meeting of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue in Brussels," a statement from the office read.

The meeting will address non-majority community arrangements and the settlement of mutual financial claims or property, the statement went on to say.

In the lead-up to the talks, Lajcak will head an expert-level meeting to discuss missing and displaced persons and economic cooperation.

STALLED DIALOGUE

The EU-sponsored Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue was set up in 2011 to facilitate a political settlement, but it has not made any significant headway so far.

Since the collapse of Yugoslavia, the status of Kosovo has been viciously disputed between Serbia and Kosovo's Muslim Albanian population. In the 1990s, the Albanians engaged in terrorist campaign against Serbian security forces and civilians, prompting Belgrade to respond to quell the unrest and preserve Serbia's territorial integrity. However, a US-led NATO military action against Serbia paved the way for Albanians to claim independence later on.

In 2008, Kosovo unilaterally announced its independence from Serbia. Russia and an overwhelming majority of the Latin American and Asian nations do not recognize the self-proclaimed state.

Pristina has since been waging a campaign with US and EU help to gain recognition by as many other states as possible and membership in international organizations, but with limited

success. Meanwhile, Serbia has launched its own campaign of convincing those states that have recognized Kosovo as an independent state to revoke their recognition.

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

WASHINGTON, September 3 (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.

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 on Wednesday. "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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RPT - Trump Takes Action to Withhold Federal Funding to Cities With 'Lawless Zones' - Memorandum

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump issued a memorandum directing administration officials to review and consider cutting funding to cities unable to prevent the establishment of lawless zones.

"My Administration will not allow Federal tax dollars to fund cities that allow themselves to deteriorate into lawless zones," Trump said in the memorandum released by the White House on Wednesday. "To ensure that Federal funds are neither unduly wasted nor spent in a manner that directly violates our Government's promise to protect life, liberty, and property, it is imperative that the Federal Government review the use of Federal funds by jurisdictions that permit anarchy, violence, and destruction in America's cities."

Trump singled out the the cities of Portland, Seattle, Washington, DC and New York City, which have experienced rioting and looting amid demonstrations against racial injustice following the death of George Floyd in May.

Trump also wants his administration to publish a list on the Justice Department website within the next two weeks identifying state and local jurisdictions that "have permitted violence and the destruction of property to persist."

In a month, Trump wants the Director of the Office of Management and Budget to recommend to the administration which "anarchist jurisdictions" should have restricted eligibility or disfavor of receiving federal grants, according to the memorandum.

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Video Surfaces of Black Man's Death in Police Custody in New York State, ACLU Wants Probe

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of New York is calling for an investigation into the death of a Black man while in police custody in March after a disturbing video of the incident was released by the Rochester Police Department, the rights group said in a statement.

"Daniel Prude needed mental health assistance. Instead he was handcuffed in near-freezing temperatures and killed by Rochester police," the ACLU said via Twitter on Wednesday. "The officers that killed Daniel Prude were never disciplined and remain on active duty. The Rochester DA [District Attorney] must open an investigation into what happened that night." Earlier on Wednesday, the Rochester Police Department released a disturbing video of body camera footage showing police officers apprehend Prude who was running naked through the streets at night.

Media reported, according to Prude's family, that he died of asphyxiation on March 30 after several police officers pulled a hood over him and pinned him to the ground for two minutes.

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Barr Warns Mail-In System Leaves Open Possibility of Counterfeiting Ballots in US Election

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General William Barr said in an interview to CNN that there is a risk of a massive forgery of mail-in ballots that will be used during the upcoming Presidential election, including by a foreign country.

"If we use the ballot system that states are just now trying to adopt it does leave open a possibility of counterfeiting ballots either by someone here or [in a foreign country]. I think everyone can do it," Barr said.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly warned the public that the Democrats have sent 80 million ballots over the mail mostly to people who have not asked for them and may likely misuse them to affect the election result. As examples, Trump has given the recent elections in the states of New York and New Jersey that have been beset by mail-in fraud.

The Democrats have said mail-in ballots are necessary to avoid the spread of the novel coronavirus.

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US Attorney General Says He Sees China as Greater Threat Than Russia to 2020 US Election

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General William Barr said in an interview to CNN that China poses a greater threat than Russia to the integrity of the upcoming US presidential election.

"I believe it is China," Barr responded to question about whether Russia, China or Iran is "the most assertive, aggressive adversary" in terms of attempting to impact the 2020 US election. Barr said he has seen the intelligence concerning the attempts to influence the US election and "that's what I have concluded."

Barr did not elaborate on how China tries to interfere in the election. US intelligence officials have said earlier that China and Iran favor Democratic candidate Joe Biden while Russia prefers President Donald Trump.

Asked about Russia, which US pundits blamed for trying to interfere in the 2016 US election, Barr said he accepts that there is some preliminary activity suggesting that Moscow might try to meddle again.

"That wouldn't surprise me if Russia tries something again of the same general genre as before," Barr said.

The US Attorney General also said he would not be surprised if Russia or any other country try to disclose embarrassing documents obtained through hacking.

Russia has repeatedly denied being involved in the US political system and has said the false allegations about its 2016 involvement were made up to excuse the loss of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton as well as deflect public attention from actual instances of election fraud and corruption.

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First Firing Test for Artemis Moon Mission Rocket Engine 'Successfully Completed' - NASA

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The first full-scale booster engine test for the Space Launch System, the largest US rocket motor ever built, at Promontory, Utah was a full success, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) officials announced.

"NASA and Northrop Grumman successfully complete the Flight Support Booster-1 (FSB-1) test in Promontory, Utah, on September 2," space agency said on Wednesday. "The full-scale booster firing was conducted with new materials and processes that may be used for NASA's Space Launch System (SLS) rocket boosters."

NASA and Northrop Grumman, the SLS boosters lead contractor, will use data from the two-minute-long firing test to evaluate the motor's performance using potential new materials and processes for Artemis missions beyond the initial Moon landing in 2024, the space agency said.

"The SLS boosters are the largest, most powerful boosters ever built for flight. The two boosters on the rocket provide more than 75 percent of the thrust needed to launch NASA's future deep space missions through NASA's Artemis lunar program," the space agency said.

The SLS flight support booster firing was a crucial part of sustaining missions to the Moon the beginning of NASA's Artemis Program, NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine said.

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US Envoy Says White House Looking at Measures to Bring China Into Arms Control Talks

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea said in a statement that he met with White House officials to discuss measures to bring China to the negotiating table on nuclear arms control.

"Always good to visit [White House Economic Adviser] Peter Navarro and Deputy Assistant to the President Ryan Tully at the White House to discuss measures to bring Communist China to the negotiating table on nuclear arms," Billingslea said via Twitter on Wednesday.

Last month, Billingslea said the Trump administration had dropped its demand for China to join its arms control negotiations with Russia. The administration is focused on securing a political agreement with Russia and then urging China to join the talks and subsequently a reaching an arms control agreement.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov and Billingslea met in Vienna last month to discuss the extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which limits both countries' nuclear weapon stockpiles but is set to expire in February.

The US Defense Department released a report earlier that estimated China's stockpile of nuclear warheads in the "low 200s," a fraction of US and Russian arsenals. However, the report said the US military believes China will double that number over the next ten years.

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US Court Rules NSA Bulk Collection of Americans' Phone Records 'Illegal'- Rights Group

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - A US federal court has ruled as illegal the National Security Agency's (NSA) bulk collection of US citizens' phone records, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said.

"A federal appeals court just ruled that the NSA's bulk collection of Americans' phone records was illegal. This ruling, which confirms what we have always known, is a in a statement for our privacy rights," ACLU said via Twitter.

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PREVIEW - US Wants Serbia-Kosovo Summit to Push Economic Ties, Play Down Deadlock

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US policymakers hope the White House-hosted summit on Thursday and Friday between Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti will focus on building new economic ties between the two adversaries and avoid the many contentious unresolved political issues between them. "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," a senior Trump administration official told reporters.

US President Donald Trump wanted to foster conditions of economic growth and increased opportunities for young people that would generate a new sense of prosperity and willingness to move ahead from the sterile conflicts of the past, the senior official explained.

"What President 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," the senior official said.

Vucic and Hoti are slated to meet at the White House on Thursday for talks hosted by US Special Envoy Richard Grenell, the White House said.

However, it remained unclear whether Trump would participate, the senior official said.

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

Kosovo has since experienced ethnic cleansing of its non-Albanian population - including Serbs, Macedonians and others - and has become a key international organized crime hub for the distribution of drugs and other contraband. Moreover, the Kosovo Albanians have aided the overall Albanian territorial designs on neighboring Macedonia and Montenegro for the creation of "Greater Albania."

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

Vucic has made clear that Belgrade would not consider the possibility of recognizing Kosovo's independence at the meeting in Washington.

POLITICAL DEADLOCK

Privately, US officials acknowledge that no progress has been on any major political dispute between Serbia and the Kosovo Albanians, hence their hopes that they can help generate a new more constructive willingness to work together on both sides by focusing on economic cooperation.

With only two months to go before the US presidential elections on November 3, critics, especially in the European Commission in Brussels and among major European Union nations have said they believe Trump wants to give the illusion of both progress and hands-on US involvement.

However, the real, continued heavy lifting seeking to find an eventual settlement between the two disputing parties continues to be done by the Europeans centered in Brussels, they say. The European Union has continually pressured and conditioned Serbia to give up its ownership of Kosovo and to recognize its statehood.

US officials counter that Trump administration Special Envoy Grinnell has at least brought Vucic and Hoti face to face in Washington and has previously pressured Albanians to give up their draconian taxing and other policies on Serbian goods.

In any case, Brussels is set to host a new round of high-level negotiations between the two sides next Monday with the participation of the European Union's top diplomat and special envoy for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, the EU diplomatic office said on Wednesday.

"On Monday 7 September, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, and the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues, Miroslav Lajcak, will host the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, and the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Avdullah Hoti, for another high-level meeting of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue in Brussels," a statement from the office read.

The meeting will address non-majority community arrangements and the settlement of mutual financial claims or property, the statement went on to say.

In the lead-up to the talks, Lajcak will head an expert-level meeting to discuss missing and displaced persons and economic cooperation.

STALLED DIALOGUE

The EU-sponsored Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue was set up in 2011 to facilitate a political settlement, but it has not made any significant headway so far.

Since the collapse of Yugoslavia, the status of Kosovo has been viciously disputed between Serbia and Kosovo's Muslim Albanian population. In the 1990s, the Albanians engaged in terrorist campaign against Serbian security forces and civilians, prompting Belgrade to respond to quell the unrest and preserve Serbia's territorial integrity. However, a US-led NATO military action against Serbia paved the way for Albanians to claim independence later on.

In 2008, Kosovo unilaterally announced its independence from Serbia. Russia and an overwhelming majority of the Latin American and Asian nations do not recognize the self-proclaimed state.

Pristina has since been waging a campaign with US and EU help to gain recognition by as many other states as possible and membership in international organizations, but with limited success. Meanwhile, Serbia has launched its own campaign of convincing those states that have recognized Kosovo as an independent state to revoke their recognition.

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US Secures \$60M In Settlement in Malaysia 1MDB Embezzlement Case - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice said in a news release that it has reached another settlement worth \$60 million on assets held by Riza Aziz, the Malaysian-born producer of The Wolf of Wall Street movie, in the embezzlement case involving Malaysia's 1MDB sovereign fund.

"The Department of Justice has reached a settlement of its civil forfeiture cases against assets acquired by Riza Aziz utilizing funds allegedly embezzled from 1Malaysia Development Berhad

(1MDB). These assets are estimated to be worth more than \$60 million," the release said on Wednesday.

The United States will have recovered or assisted in the recovery of nearly \$1.1 billion in assets associated with the 1MDB international money laundering and bribery scheme with the conclusion of the settlement, the release noted.

The 1MDB case involves a multi-jurisdictional investigation of the theft of nearly \$3 billion or more from the fund before being laundered through the banking and financial systems of other countries, including Switzerland and the United States. Aziz's Red Granite Productions is accused of financing the 2013 movie *The Wolf of Wall Street* with some of the laundered money.

The Justice Department said Aziz and his associates are alleged to have bought a super-yacht, real estate in the United States and various paintings and financed their luxurious lifestyles with the laundered money.

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, who is Aziz's stepfather, was sentenced in July to 12 years in prison by a court in Kuala Lumpur for his role in the case.

The Justice Department said the \$1.1 billion of assets it seized from in the case represented its largest civil forfeiture ever.

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US Approves Possible \$284M In Sale of 100 Missiles to Spain - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State has approved a sale of 100 medium range air-to-air missiles to Spain worth \$248.5 million, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in a statement.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Spain of one hundred (100) AIM-120C-7/8 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) and one (1) AMRAAM Guidance Section (spare) and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$248.5 million," the statement said on Wednesday.

The sale also includes a spare missile guidance section and related parts and equipment, according to the statement.

The agency added that the new missiles will improve the defense capability of Spain and the United States through the NATO alliance.

The contract will be fulfilled primarily by Raytheon Missiles and Defense based in Tucson, AZ.

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UN Studying Venezuela's Invitation to Monitor Parliamentary Elections - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 3 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has received a letter from Venezuela inviting its observers to monitor the country's parliamentary elections and is currently studying it, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza said earlier on Wednesday the country had sent an invitation to the United Nations and the European Union to participate as observers in the elections scheduled to be held on December 6.

"I confirm we've received a letter and we are studying it's content," Dujarric said on Wednesday. The US State Department has urged its partners to reject the results of the upcoming elections in Venezuela. Washington has been trying to push Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro out of power since President Donald Trump took office.

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US Admiral Davidson Calls China 'Strategic Threat' in WWII Victory Anniversary Address

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik) - US Indo-Pacific fleet Commander Adm. Philip Davidson during the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II in Hawaii accused China of attempting to undermine the international order and characterized the country as being "a strategic threat."

"An emboldened Communist party of China seeks to change the world to one in which Chinese national power is more important than international law. [China is trying] to coerce, to corrupt and to contest the rules-based international order," Davidson said on Wednesday.

Davidson delivered his speech aboard the battleship USS Missouri, where Japan signed an unconditional surrender in 1945 to allied nations, including China. The ship is moored in Pearl Harbor.

"Today, as we address the strategic threat of China and the other security challenges throughout the Indo-Pacific region, the memory of our greatest generation leaves on, it leaves on in our soldiers, our sailors, our airmen, marines and our coast guardsmen today," Davidson said.

Americans remember their World War II heroes and pay tribute to them by continuing to defend the values of a free and open Indo-Pacific region and keeping the United States, its allies and partners free from tyranny while defending our shared values, Davidson added.

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper said during the ceremony that strengthening the existing alliances and forging new ones is a centerpiece of the United States' strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

"From our alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia to our long collaboration with ASEAN countries, India, New Zealand and the Pacific island countries," Esper said. "Growing, deepening and unifying this network must remain central to our collective strategy to ensure peace and prosperity for another 75 years and beyond."

The United States embraces "the importance of what President Ronald Reagan called 'peace through strength' and builds a military and alliance structure to match that imperative," Esper added.

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US Dow Jones Stock Index Rises Above 29,000 as S&P500, Nasdaq Hit Record Highs

NEW YORK, September 3 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's Dow Jones Industrial Average closed above 29,000 points for the first time since the pandemic-induced lockdowns began while top US stocks indicator S&P 500 and the tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite both hit record highs. The Dow, the broadest index on the New York Stock Exchange, closed up 453 points, or 1.6 percent, at 29,101. It was the first settlement above 29,000 for the index since February. Stocks on Wall Street rallied despite the Federal Reserve cautioning in its Beige Book report that the COVID-19 was throttling US economic recovery, with many districts in the country seeing slowing growth even as manufacturing activity and consumer spending rose. Carriers such United Airlines and American Airlines have also said they will slash tens of thousands of jobs by next month if Congress was unable to pass new aid to help them keep workers. "Bullish stock market sentiment seems to be nearing a tentative peak as the labor market recovery stalls," said Ed Moya, analyst at New York-based online brokerage ONDA. "Congress seems no closer to delivering the next virus relief package, and the constant back and forth rotation with tech and cyclicals is not enough of a reason to keep the major indexes from making fresh record highs."

The Dow's run-up aside, the S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, hit a record high of 3,588 on Wednesday before closing up 1.5 percent at 3,580. The tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite peaked at 11,836 before finishing at 12,056, up 1 percent on the day.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 3 (Sputnik)

US SANCTIONS 2 INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT STAFF

* US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday that Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda from Gambia and Phakiso Mochochoko from Lesotho - both serve on the International Criminal Court (ICC) - have been added to the Office of Foreign Assets Control's Specially Designated Nationals List.

* The International Criminal Court condemns the 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.

NAVALNY CASE

* The German government on Wednesday that a military laboratory had undeniable proof Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny was poisoned with a nerve agent from the Novichok group.

* German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas on Wednesday urged the Russian authorities to find those responsible for the poisoning of opposition activist Alexei Navalny and bring them to justice.

* A whole range of tests was conducted for Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny in Russia before he was taken to Berlin, no toxic substances were detected, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Navalny's symptoms are absolutely uncharacteristic with the use of the Novichok nerve agent, Leonid Rink, who was directly involved in the development of Novichok, told Sputnik.

* Neither the health authorities nor law enforcement agencies in the West took the responsibility to comment on the situation involving Navalny, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, adding that the West is engaged in a classic information campaign ran by politicians.

* The German Foreign Office did not bring up sanctions with Russian Ambassador Sergei Nechayev, who was summoned on Wednesday for a briefing on the new findings in the alleged poisoning of Navalny, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* NATO will consult with its members about possible implications of Germany's new statements about allegations of poisoning of Navalny, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

UKRAINE CEASEFIRE

* The Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) on the settlement of the conflict in Donbas has agreed to continue observing the ceasefire, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office said on Wednesday.

US IMPOSES RESTRICTIONS ON CHINESE DIPLOMATS

* 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.

BELARUS DEVELOPMENTS

* The United States government is considering "significant targeted sanctions" against those individuals who have been involved in human rights abuses amid ongoing civil unrest in Belarus, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters on Wednesday.

* 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.

* Pavel Latushko, a member of the Belarusian opposition-led Coordination Council's chairmanship, told Sputnik on Wednesday he had left for Poland to attend an international economic forum and a series of meetings at the Polish Foreign Ministry.