

02/11/21 Thursday

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'The Squad' Urges Biden to Drop Venezuela Sanctions Amid 'Catastrophic Humanitarian Consequences'

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

For years, the administrations of Donald Trump and Barack Obama maintained that economic sanctions on nations like Venezuela, Iran and North Korea made no affect on the acquisition of humanitarian aid, while admitting that the goal was to make life in the nations intolerable and compel the governments to comply with US demands.

A group of progressive lawmakers are urging US President Joe Biden to review Washington's sanctions policy on Venezuela in the midst of what they call "catastrophic humanitarian consequences," particularly relating to combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

A [Thursday letter](#) written by Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Reps. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) and Jesús G. "Chuy" Garcia (D-IL) was also signed by over a dozen Democrats, including Sen. Ed Markey and Reps. Joaquin Castro, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley, and Ro Khanna.

"It is both a moral and public health imperative that our efforts to combat COVID-19 are global in scope because the pandemic's economic consequences require international cooperation," the lawmakers wrote. "The pandemic does not adhere to borders, nor does it account for complex geopolitical realities - until the virus is eradicated everywhere, it is not eradicated anywhere."

The lawmakers cited Biden's pledge on the second day of his administration to [review all existing sanctions](#) on other nations and their impacts on COVID-19 relief, and urged Biden to "consider the humanitarian impacts of sanctions more broadly."

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro has sent a congratulatory message to U.S.

President-elect Joe Biden who won the U.S. presidential election, defeating incumbent Donald Trump.

"And while they have demonstrably harmed civilian populations, caused authoritarian governments to further constrict civil spaces and repress civil and political rights, squeezed the ability of humanitarian organizations to provide support during crises and disasters, made basic staples such as food, medicine, and gasoline prohibitively expensive, created and fueled black market economies, and driven our rivals deeper into dependency on one another, we have historically not conducted regular assessments to determine how sanctions connect to the policy outcomes they seek to achieve so that it's often difficult to demonstrably prove their net benefit to national interests and security," they added, noting in particular a "persistent problem of overcompliance, particularly from the financial sector."

Ironically, even [several oil giants](#) have requested a lowering of some sanctions against the South American nation. Last month, representatives from US-based Chevron and India's Reliance Industries urged Biden's state department to revive 'oil swap' transactions exchanging diesel fuel for Venezuela's plentiful crude oil, which it has struggled to produce, as, [buying](#)

[necessary parts](#) for its refineries has also been blocked by US sanctions, creating chronic shortages.

#### Widespread Condemnation of Sanctions

On Monday, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), a nonpartisan auditing agency created by Congress, [released a report](#) showing that US sanctions were partially responsible for the implosion of the Venezuelan economy since 2015, when then-US President Barack Obama declared Venezuela a “national security threat,” and that these sanctions had directly inhibited the flow of humanitarian aid to the country, [despite protestations otherwise](#) by the Trump administration.

Those sanctions increased dramatically after the the Trump administration backed Juan Guaido, an opposition politician who declared himself Venezuela’s interim president in January 2019. Trump rallied several dozen Western nations to pressure Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro to step down in favor of Guaido, whose repeated coup attempts they attempted to amplify support for with [strangling sanctions](#). Instead, Guaido’s movement fizzled and in December 2020 [parliamentary elections](#), voters delivered a strong majority to Maduro’s United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) co-director [Mark Weisbrot noted](#) the GAO’s report is “more evidence that these unilateral, illegal US sanctions are a form of collective punishment against the Venezuelan population and should be ended immediately.”

In April 2019, [CEPR published a report](#) on “economic sanctions as collective punishment,” demonstrating that the two years of sanctions since 2017 had caused an acute shortage of medicine in the country, to which more than 40,000 excess deaths were directly attributable. Another 300,000 people were put at risk, including people with HIV, cancer, diabetes, hypertension, and who require dialysis treatments. That was before the COVID-19 pandemic began.

#### COVID-19 in Venezuela

In April 2020, just days after the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, [Pope Francis criticized](#) the effect sanctions would have on fighting the outbreak, saying “these make it difficult for countries on which they have been imposed to provide adequate support to their citizens” and that he hopes “concrete and immediate solutions to be reached that can permit international assistance to a population suffering from the grave political, socio- economic and health situation.”

As in [heavily-sanctioned Iran](#), Venezuela has faced chronic shortages of basic medical goods that have been partially alleviated by [solidarity shipments](#) from China and Russia, but continue to cause major problems in the country’s medical facilities. Thanks to rigorous social measures, including [extensive COVID-19 testing](#) and the [suspension of rents](#) and evictions to facilitate better adherence to social shutdowns, Venezuela has generally fared better than many of its neighbors in terms of the size of the outbreak. They have been able to [send aid to Manaus](#), in Brazil’s neighboring Amazonas state, where three quarters of the population of 2.2 million have been infected with COVID-19 in a catastrophic outbreak.

Still, according to data collected by the [Johns Hopkins University](#), there have been more than 131,000 cases and 1,253 deaths from the illness in the country. Now, they are set to receive vaccines from Russia, China, [and Cuba](#), even though [Guaido has attempted](#) to stop Caracas from buying the medicine.

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After 'Mandalorian' Star Carano's Firing, Twitter Hounds Out Co-Star Pascal's Controversial Posts  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

During Black Lives Matter mass protests in 2020, Disney drew sharp criticism from British-Nigerian actor John Boyega, who played Finn in the Star Wars films and accused the media company of pushing black characters "to the side" in the franchise while focusing heavily on the development of white characters.

After martial artist and actress [Gina Carano](#) was fired from her role as Cara Dune on Disney's "The Mandalorian" Star Wars TV show due to social media posts, some started digging up posts by her co-star, Pedro Pascal, suggesting that he should get the boot as well.

Lucasfilm said on Thursday Carano's "social media posts denigrating people based on their cultural and religious identities are abhorrent and unacceptable," referring to a wide [variety of posts](#) she had made that included mocking trans people's pronouns to defending former US President Donald Trump's claims of voter fraud in the 2020 election as well as comparisons between victims of the Nazi Holocaust and "hating someone for their political views."

In response, some posted controversial posts by Pascal that also involved comparisons to the Holocaust, crying foul over a presumption of double standards at Disney.

In one now-deleted Instagram post from after the November 3, 2020, US presidential election that then-US President Donald Trump lost, Pascal compared Trump's "Make America Great Again" movement to the Nazis as well as to the Confederacy, an attempted breakaway republic formed by 11 US states that didn't want to give up its enslavement of black Americans in 1861. Pascal's post called each "losers."

Conservative podcaster Ben Shapiro tweeted another of Pascal's posts on Thursday, with the caption: "Disney+ must immediately fire any actor who has made an overwrought Holocaust comparison."

In the 2018 post, Pascal contrasted an image of prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp in 1944 with Latino children in a US detention facility in 2018 with no additional comment. However, the specific image the actor used was later revealed to actually be of Palestinian children in a [Hebron soup kitchen](#).

Pascal's tweet dates to the time of the infamous zero tolerance policy by which the US Department of Homeland Security [separated migrant children](#) from their alleged parents, hundreds of whom still have not been reunited. At the time, comparisons to the Holocaust were readily [made by survivors](#) of the Nazis' camps, although the issue [was hotly debated](#).

Some other conservative figures picked up Shapiro's talking point, including former Vice journalist Tim Pool and right-wing social media gossip site Twitchy. While some came down on Shapiro's side and called for Pascal to be fired, others thought the conflation was stretched.

One person had a [neutral solution](#): "How about no celebrity left or right ever mentions their politics online ever."

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US CDC Expected to Issue New Guidelines for School Reopening as Teachers Fight for Safety by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US government has pushed for students to return to in-person learning beginning summer 2020, in part because an estimated one-third of the US workforce, or 50 million people, are parents who cannot return to work while their children are learning at home.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is expected to soon issue new guidelines on safely reopening schools amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The Biden administration has made reopening a priority, but it has encountered significant resistance from communities and teachers' unions.

[According to CNN](#), the new guidelines are expected to include hand washing, masking, social distancing, cleaning and ventilation, as well as contact tracing, isolation and quarantine. The agency is not expected to recommend that all staff be vaccinated beforehand, but to incorporate vaccination as just another "layer" of defense.

Early detection of COVID-19 cases, including asymptomatic cases, will be a top priority, but the news outlet gave no details about how the government will recommend accomplishing their task, aside from rigorous testing.

Science and Policy Debates

The [CDC previously revised](#) school safety guidelines in July 2020, [amid heavy pressure](#) from central Trump administration figures who pushed for public schools to reopen in the fall. The CDC previously maintained extremely strict guidelines, but later fell into line with a set of recommendations that closely resembled the stance of then-Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, who sought to quickly open schools.

The Trump administration was motivated, in large part, by the desire for parents to [return to work](#), which for tens of millions of workers is not possible while underage children learn remotely at home. One [study in July](#) suggested that roughly 50 million workers, or one-third of the US workforce, was affected by the circumstance.

The new CDC director, Rochelle Walensky, has maintained the agency's position, saying at a [White House briefing](#) last week that "school should be the last places closed and the first places open."

A [CDC study published](#) last month, on the effects of COVID-19 community spread due to in-person teaching, found that "there has been little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission."

The study notes that in several communities studied across the US, within-school transmission rates were noticeably lower than community transmission rates. It noted several examples where this was not the case, but faulted inadequate safety measures, including crowded rooms, exemptions from mask-wearing, and inadequate ventilation systems that simply recycled the same air instead of purifying or replacing it.

The study did not, however, investigate the effects of COVID-19 infections at school on a wider community spread, which many critics have noted is the greater danger, since children can bring the virus home and pass it to other family members. Another study published last month in [Pediatrics found that](#) while children often suffered less severe symptoms of COVID-19 than adults in their household, their likelihood of spreading it was equally high.

#### Overcoming 'Sick Buildings'

A school districts' ability to meet those safety standards cannot be taken for granted, though. Many school districts pushed back on the fall 2020 reopening, citing inadequate safety measures, and some [quickly backed off](#) of their reopening plans when new COVID-19 outbreaks began almost immediately.

In the nation's capital, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) did not attempt to open until November 2020, but even those plans were pushed back after teachers, parents and community members [rallied against it](#), saying in particular that school ventilation systems had not even had prior inadequacies addressed, much less brought up to COVID-19 safety specifications.

"Most schools, especially those attended by Black, brown, indigenous, and poor White students have severely outdated ventilation systems and no testing or tracing programs to speak of," said National Education Association President Becky Pringle to CNN on Thursday.

"We need to ensure that we have the additional funds to help our more marginalized students and schools, because we're digging out of a hole here," Pringle stated, adding, "here we are with outdated ventilation systems - sick buildings - that we want to send kids back into with the coronavirus still raging."

#### 'We Want to Come Back When It's Safe'

Schools in DC partially reopened on February 1, but after a week of classes, less than 10,000 of the 15,000 eligible student slots had been filled, according to the [Washington Post](#), which noted that five elementary schools had already each sent a class home for a 14-day quarantine period after a student had tested positive for COVID-19.

On Thursday, Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Union reached an agreement about reopening the city's schools that will see kids return in staggered groups based on grade, with high schoolers continuing to learn remotely.

"I think the real test of whether or not CTU was successful in negotiating a better plan is going to be whether or not we see more (students) return," teacher James Klock told the [Chicago Tribune](#). "Now the safety committees, the mechanism by which this agreement is to be upheld, now those need to form immediately and start working to share power between administrators and educators."

The move followed a vote of no confidence in Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and CPS CEO Janice Jackson by the teacher's union earlier this week because "it has taken almost a year of effort just to extract the most basic enforceable safety guarantees from a school district with a dismal record of broken promises," the union [said in a statement](#).

When CPS attempted to reopen last month, [just 20% of eligible](#) students showed up, reflecting widespread hostility to the move.

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, last week, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers refused to return to in-person teaching, [protesting outside](#) of school buildings as they awaited the judgment of a neutral third-party assigned to evaluate the city's safety upgrades. Similarly to Chicago, just

8% of students eligible to return have actually registered to do so, according to the [Philadelphia Inquirer](#).

“We want to work,” Elanda Tolliver, an educational assistant at a city school, told the paper. “But we want to come back safe. That’s all we’re asking.”

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Biden Administration Requests Court Pause Trump Move to Ban WeChat  
by [Mary F.](#)

WeChat, a Chinese social media and mobile payment app first released in 2011, became the world’s-largest mobile app in 2018, with over 1 billion active monthly users. The administration of former US President Donald Trump moved to ban WeChat and other Chinese-owned social media apps last fall, citing security concerns.

The Biden administration on Thursday requested that a federal court pause a case regarding Trump’s effort to ban WeChat, with administration officials telling the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals that they require additional time to review the proposed ban.

“As the Biden Administration has taken office, the Department of Commerce has begun a review of certain recently issued agency actions, including the Secretary’s prohibitions regarding the WeChat mobile application at issue in this appeal,” reads the court filing, obtained by the [Washington Post](#).

“In relation to those prohibitions, the Department plans to conduct an evaluation of the underlying record justifying those prohibitions. The government will then be better positioned to determine whether the national security threat described in the President’s August 6, 2020 Executive Order, and the regulatory purpose of protecting the security of Americans and their data, continue to warrant the identified Prohibitions,” the filing adds.

The filing also noted that the Biden administration “remains committed to a robust defense of national security as well as ensuring the viability of our economy and preserving individual rights and data privacy.”

In September 2020, a federal magistrate in San Francisco blocked Trump’s proposed ban on WeChat over First Amendment concerns, [the Post](#) reported at the time.

The latest filing comes after the Biden administration on Wednesday asked a judge to postpone a legal dispute over TikTok, a popular Chinese video app.

Oracle and Walmart had been in talks with TikTok since September 2020 over buying a majority stake in TikTok’s American operations. On Wednesday, however, [Reuters reported](#) that the two companies could face months of additional reviews under the Biden administration.

In August, Trump filed an executive order that would ban TikTok and WeChat in the US over claims that they are a threat to US national security.

“The spread [of apps controlled by the Chinese government] continues to threaten the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States,” the [order read](#). “The United States must take aggressive action against the owners of TikTok to protect our national security.”

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Sen. Rubio Calls Biden Hypocritical For Considering Domestic Travel Ban During Pandemic by [Mary F.](#)

The administration of US President Joe Biden is contemplating imposing domestic travel restrictions, as COVID-19 variants, like the strain detected in the UK, known as B.1.1.7, surge in states including Florida. So far, the COVID-19 pandemic has infected over 27 million people in the US.

On Thursday, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), called the Biden administration's consideration of a travel ban due to the surge of new COVID-19 variants "hypocritical."

"The day after Donald Trump issued a travel ban on China, Joe Biden said this is no time for xenophobia and that sort of thing," Rubio [told Fox & Friends](#). "And then a month later, [Biden] actually tweeted out that banning travel from anywhere did not work," Rubio added.

Rubio criticized the administration for considering travel restrictions within US states.

"So now that they're considering actual restrictions on Americans inside the country, I think it is unconstitutional. I think it's going to be challenged in court successfully," he argued.

Last month, White House press secretary Jen Psaki stated that it was unfair to suggest that Biden described Trump's COVID-19 travel ban as "xenophobic."

"I don't think that's quite a fair articulation," Psaki told Fox News' Peter Doocy, [the outlet reported](#).

"The president has been clear that he felt the Muslim ban was xenophobic. He overturned the Muslim ban. He also, though, has supported steps, travel restrictions, in order to keep the American people safe, to ensure that we are getting the pandemic under control. That's been part of his policy, but he was critical of the former president for having a policy that was not more comprehensive than travel restrictions," she added.

COVID-19 outbreaks in the US involving new variants, including a highly-contagious one first identified in the UK and others identified in South Africa, have compelled the Biden administration to consider imposing new travel restrictions within the US, a federal official revealed this week.

"There are active conversations about what could help mitigate spread here, but we have to follow the data and what's going to work. We did this with South Africa, we did this with Brazil, because we got clear guidance," one White House official said, the [Tampa Bay Times](#) reported. "But we're having conversations about anything that would help mitigate the spread," the official added.

Last month, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci, revealed that rolling out COVID-19 vaccines quickly is key to reduce the spread of COVID-19 variants.

"Getting people vaccinated as quickly and as efficiently as you possibly can will always be the best way to prevent the further evolution of any mutant," [Fauci said](#). "When you do that, you prevent replication, and replication is essential for mutation."

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Grammy Winning Jazz Musician Chick Corea Dead at 79  
by [Mary F.](#)

Chick Corea was an American jazz composer, keyboardist and bandleader. He is credited with widening the scope of jazz during his career, which lasted over five decades.

Iconic jazz keyboardist Chick Corea died Thursday at the age of 79 in Tampa Bay, Florida, after battling a rare form of cancer.

According to a post on his Facebook page, the virtuoso, who won 23 Grammys, passed away from "a rare form of cancer which was only discovered very recently."

"Throughout his life and career, Chick relished in the freedom and the fun to be had in creating something new, and in playing the games that artists do. He was a beloved husband, father and grandfather, and a great mentor and friend to so many. Through his body of work and the decades he spent touring the world, he touched and inspired the lives of millions," the post reads.

"Though he would be the first to say that his music said more than words ever could, he nevertheless had this message for all those he knew and loved, and for all those who loved him," the post adds.

The post [also included](#) a farewell message from Corea: "I want to thank all of those along my journey who have helped keep the music fires burning bright. It is my hope that those who have an inkling to play, write, perform or otherwise, do so. If not for yourself then for the rest of us. It's not only that the world needs more artists, it's also just a lot of fun."

Corea's most famous band, Return to Forever, was founded in 1972. The band had several members throughout its run, with the only consistent partner being bassist Stanley Clarke. Many musicians, including Clarke, Flora Purim, Airtó Moreira and Al Di Meola, [rose to fame through](#) their performances on Return to Forever albums.

Before founding Return to Forever, Corea was a top piano player in the 1960s, where he played with prominent musicians including Miles Davis, Stan Getz and Herbie Mann.

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AstraZeneca Says Vaccine Against COVID-19 Variants May Take Nine Months to Develop  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Officials in South Africa recently halted the rollout of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine after a study revealed it offered little protection against the deadly disease's 501Y.V2 variant, which has become dominant in the country. However, it's unlikely the vaccine will be permanently tossed aside as leaders work to redirect the vaccines elsewhere.

UK-based pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca has revealed the company has been working on creating a vaccine effective against new variants of COVID-19, and that it may take more than a few months to fully develop.

Officials noted in 2020 [financial review](#) released on Thursday that the possible COVID-19 vaccine would be developed in conjunction with the University of Oxford “by utilising existing clinical data and optimising its established supply chain.”

“In collaboration with the University of Oxford, AstraZeneca is focused on adapting C19VAZ to new disease strains if required and hopes to reduce the time needed to reach production at scale to between six to nine months,” reads the report, which also recognizes the vaccine candidate only provides “minimal” protection against mild and moderate cases of the 501Y.V2 variant.

AstraZeneca’s two-dose COVID-19 vaccine - reported to have an efficacy rate of 82.4% - was initially praised for its less constraining storage requirements and cheaper cost, but it was soon realized that the vaccine had some drawbacks. While it remains effective against the disease’s UK strain, the same cannot be said for the South Africa variant.

A [small trial](#) conducted in South Africa by a team of researchers determined the vaccine only had an efficacy rate of about 10% when it was administered to individuals in the study who had contracted the 501Y.V2 strain of the disease.

While the South Africa variant isn’t believed to be more deadly than other strains, it is considered to be much more infectious. Having become the dominant strain in South Africa, health professionals have documented its circulation in the Eastern Cape, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces, according to the [World Health Organization](#).

Although the trial’s findings ultimately prompted South African officials to halt AstraZeneca’s vaccine rollout for 1 million doses, not all has been lost. Leadership with the African Union [stated Thursday](#) that officials would instead begin to distribute vaccines to countries that have not yet reported 501Y.V2 cases.

Aside from South Africa, the variant has only been detected in six other countries. Most recently, [two cases](#) of the strain emerged in the US, specifically in California’s Alameda and Santa Clara counties.

AstraZeneca CEO Pascal Soriot recently acknowledged during a conference call regarding the vaccine that while “it’s not perfect” the candidate is “great.”

“Who else is making 100 million doses in February?” he questioned before noting that the company was “going to save thousands of lives and that’s why we come to work everyday.” The UK drugmaker aims to produce some 3 billion vaccine doses this year, with many of the shots set to be shipped to poorer nations.

Developments surrounding AstraZeneca’s vaccine came as fellow pharmaceutical company Moderna [has launched](#) an initiative to develop a COVID-19 booster shot that better targets the South African mutation. Although Moderna’s vaccine is responsive to the 501Y.V2 strain, its effect isn’t as high as with other COVID-19 adaptations.

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DoJ Reveals Militia Leader Was 'Awaiting Direction' From Trump Ahead of Capitol Riot  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since the deadly storming of the US Capitol building by Trump loyalists, federal authorities have brought multiple charges against rioters, many of whom remain behind bars over concerns they may incite additional violent actions against the government.

Federal prosecutors revealed in a Thursday [court filing](#) that Jessica Watkins, a Ohio militia leader, was "awaiting direction" from former US President Donald Trump in the days leading up to the deadly Capitol riot.

The filing, which includes some of the most direct links between Trump and the rioters, states Watkins is a "key figure who put into motion the violence that overwhelmed the Capitol" and was by no means "an ancillary player who became swept up in the moment."

A military veteran who is a "dues-paying member of the Oath Keepers," Watkins is alleged to be the commanding officer of the non-official Ohio State Regular Militia, a local organization whose members make up a subset of the Oath Keepers group, according to the filing.

Text messages obtained by investigators note that Watkins and other individuals had established training sessions for members and new recruits that included two days of "wargames" that made up a "larger 'combat' training for 'urban warfare, riot control, and rescue operations.'"

In one message included in the filing, Watkins tells a recruit that they're needed "fighting fit by innauguration [sic]" while telling another member that "the rest of us will be training with [recruits] to get us all field-ready before inauguration."

However, as Inauguration Day drew nearer, the military veteran indicated that she was "awaiting direction" from Trump before taking action over the latter's claims of a stolen election. She noted in a November 9 text message that she was growing increasingly concerned that "this is an elaborate trap."

"Unless the POTUS himself activates us, it's not legit. The POTUS has the right to activate units too. If Trump asks me to come, I will. Otherwise, I can't trust it," the message continued.

Watkins eventually received her undisclosed signal, later telling co-defendant Donovan Crowl that militia members intended to travel to Washington, DC, on January 6 because "Trump wants all able bodied Patriots to come."

Additional messages exchanged with others revealed that plans were in place for some members to remain outside of the nation's capital and serve as a "quick reaction force" that would be able to funnel weapons and be at the ready, should Trump call on them to enter the district.

By the time the infamous January 6 "[Stop the Steal](#)" rally was held, Watkins told fellow militia members over an encrypted app channel that her group included between 30 and 40 individuals who were "sticking together and sticking to the plan," prosecutors highlighted. After breaching security barriers at the Capitol, Watkins radioed to others that her group was "in the main dome right now. We are rocking it."

The intentions of the group became clearer when an unidentified individual radioed that individuals should be making citizen's arrests. "Arrest this assembly, we have probable cause for acts of treason, election fraud," the unknown male was allegedly heard saying.

In their argument to keep Watkins in jail pending trial, prosecutors argued that the deadly Capitol riot that saw five people killed “was a moment to relish in the swirling violence in the air” for Watkins, adding that she “exhibited a single-minded devotion to obstruct through violence an official proceeding.”

“Crimes of this magnitude, committed with such zeal, belie any conditions of release that would reasonably assure the safety of the community or by which Watkins could be trusted to abide,” officials argued. “Unlike the vast majority, Watkins had trained and plotted for a moment like this.”

Watkins, who was arrested on January 18, along with Crowl, has been hit with [several charges](#), including obstructing an official proceeding and destruction of government property, among other offenses.

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Chauvin Plea Deal Reportedly Rejected by Former AG Barr Over Concerns It Would Appear Lenient  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

George Floyd died on May 25, 2020, after a confrontation with Minnesota police saw the since-fired officer Derek Chauvin place his knee on Floyd’s neck for over 8 minutes, despite indications he could not breathe. As cellphone footage of Floyd’s death surfaced online, nationwide protests were held and renewed calls to mitigate police brutality.

Newly-surfaced reports indicate that Chauvin agreed to plead guilty to third-degree murder and accept a lengthy prison sentence in the days after Floyd’s death, but former US Attorney General William Barr rejected the deal over concerns it would appear too lenient.

Citing sources familiar with the matter, the New York Times [reported](#) that Chauvin had been willing to go to a federal prison for over 10 years in exchange for a guarantee that he would not face any federal civil rights charges over Floyd’s death, a request that made it contingent on the federal government’s approval.

Although the deal was set at the time, Barr eventually rejected the arrangement after concluding the quick deal would be looked down on by the public. Additionally, Barr reportedly wanted to provide more time for state officials to come to their own conclusions in the case.

Confirming the development to [NBC News](#), an unidentified former Justice Department official revealed that the potential deal had been rejected by both politically-appointed and career officials at the Justice Department.

“His lawyers were trying to rush us, and we didn’t want to be rushed,” the official told the outlet. Lacey Severins, a spokesperson for the Hennepin County attorney’s office, explained to NBC News that similar negotiations are “typical in many cases,” and that it’s “common” officials later “have no agreed upon negotiations develop.”

“This case was no different. Negotiations were discussed, nothing developed,” she underscored.

Chauvin, who is presently charged with second-degree murder and manslaughter, is expected to appear in court for trial proceedings on March 8. Recently, the prosecution issued a request to reinstate a third-degree murder charge; however the motion was tossed out by the judge. Three other officers charged with aiding and abetting in the case are scheduled for trial over the summer. All three have also been dismissed from the Minnesota police force.

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#### Unconventional Triple Threat - Political Cartoon

With the days of roaming the White House corridors behind him, the former US president, Donald Trump, reportedly spent his first few post-presidency weeks slammed by investigations and a multitude of legal proceedings over the deadly 6 January Capitol riot.

As House impeachment managers close their arguments in the Senate trial, Trump must also contend with a newly-launched criminal probe by Georgia prosecutors over phone calls he made with state officials suggesting that they change the outcome of the 2020 US election. Republican officials in the Peach State have been instructed to preserve documents, as the office of Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis is reviewing a variety of potential criminal charges related to Trump's "attempts to influence" the election.

Georgia became a focal point for Trump's failed bid for a second term, with ballots being recounted [three times](#) in the state. State prosecutors are now probing three [phone calls](#) Trump made to Republican Governor Brian Kemp, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and a state elections investigator who were all asked by the former president to either "find" the votes he needed to overturn the Biden win or "find the fraud."

As if the Senate trial and the Georgia investigation weren't enough, Trump is also facing an [expanding probe](#) from state prosecutors in Manhattan into the finances of the Trump Organization.

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'We Were Lucky': Bill Gates Says Climate Change, Bioterrorism Are Now Greatest Threats to Humanity

by [Evan Craighead](#)

American business magnate, philanthropist and Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates in a 2015 Ted Talk notably warned that the world was unprepared to take on a "highly infectious virus" that was likely to kill "over 10 million people in the next few decades."

After months of criticism related to his COVID-19 [vaccine investments](#), Gates is now sounding the alarm over two disasters that could have a tragic impact on humanity: climate change and bioterrorism.

“One is climate change. Every year that would be a death toll even greater than the one we would have in this pandemic,” the Microsoft co-founder told Derek Muller in [an interview](#) for YouTube Channel Veritasium. “Also, related to pandemics is something people don’t like to talk about much, which is bioterrorism, that somebody who wants to cause damage could engineer a virus. So that means the chance of running into this is more than just the naturally caused epidemics like the current one.”

The American business magnate also asserted that the world got lucky with the novel coronavirus' case fatality rate.

“Pandemics can be worse in terms of the fatalities. Smallpox was over 30 percent fatality,” Gates said. “We were lucky that the fatality here is not, not super high, but we can nip in the bud ... the number of deaths with the right system should be a tenth of what we’ve seen here.”

More than 107 million people around the world have tested positive for COVID-19 since the pandemic began and at least 2,362,410 have died in relation to the contagious disease, according to the Johns Hopkins University [COVID-19 dashboard](#).

Gates' recent warnings appear to be a continuation of past bioterrorism concerns, as he told American health-oriented news website STAT in 2018 that a "pandemic, natural or created by bioterror," could "cause an excess - in a single year - of 10 million deaths."

He also raised concerns about bioterrorists possibly accessing nuclear weapons.

"In some ways, the bioterror thing scares me the most," Gates proclaimed. "All it takes is one small terrorism group ... Those groups have used things like anthrax ... and as yet, thank goodness, they have never gotten, been able to build, or get their hands on a nuclear weapon."

The American business magnate's comments of a possible epidemic or pandemic date back to his 2015 [Ted Talk](#).

“If anything kills over 10 million people in the next few decades, it’s most likely to be a highly infectious virus rather than a war,” he asserted in April 2015. “We’ve actually invested very little in a system to stop an epidemic. We’re not ready for the next epidemic.”

Gates and his wife, Melinda Gates, were [recently slammed](#) by Fox News opinion show host Tucker Carlson, who compared the couple's work to globally promote new vaccines to the actions of self-serving oligarchs. Carlson particularly took issue with Melinda Gates' [December 2020 call](#) for "good regulation" on "social media platforms" to combat COVID-19 vaccine misinformation.

“Is this really science? Not even close. It's oligarchy, and all the billionaires are participating in it. The tech companies announced early they would not allow anyone to criticize this vaccine, and anyone who did would be kicked off their platforms right away. Corporate media then took it upon themselves to enforce this rule,” Carlson asserted during a February broadcast of his Fox opinion show.

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Buzzworthy: Dating App Bumble's Stock Soars Following Wall Street Debut  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Bumble Inc. (BMBL) CEO Whitney Wolfe Herd, who launched the location-based dating app Bumble in late 2014, became the youngest self-made woman billionaire on Thursday after shares of the 31-year-old's company closed up 63.5% in its initial public offering (IPO). Bumble, a dating app that only allows women to make the first move in heterosexual matches, became a public company on February 11 and quickly sold an estimated 50 million shares initially priced at \$43 each, according [to CNBC](#). BMBL ultimately opened at \$76 a share Thursday, trading up almost 77% and raising \$2.15 billion.

Match Group Inc. (MTCH), which oversees dating platforms like Tinder, Match, Meetic, OkCupid, Hinge, Pairs, PlentyOfFish, and OurTime, has a market cap of \$45.5 billion, versus newcomer Bumble's \$7.7-billion market cap, CNBC reported.

"So today is day one of our commitment to our community and shareholders to build out our long-term vision: to be the platform to meet new people, no matter who you might be looking for, whichever life stage or situation you're in," [Herd said](#) before ringing the Nasdaq opening bell Thursday.

"I want to thank the remarkable women who paved the way for Bumble in the public markets. By supporting and championing each other, we can break down barriers for the next generation of women and folks from marginalized communities. We can't wait to cheer them on!" the Bumble CEO said.

Herd, now the youngest female founder to take a US company public, notably sued former employer Match Group Inc. in June 2014 over sexual assault allegations tied to Tinder CEO Sean Rad and fellow Tinder co-founder Justin Mateen.

Herd, who was unmarried at the time, [alleged](#) that Rad removed her co-founder title because she was a woman, suggesting that five founders was "too many." She also claimed that Mateen, who she dated on-and-off for a year, said it was "slutty" for her to be the co-founder of a hookup app.

"Whitney's lawsuit against Tinder has been resolved (without admission of wrongdoing)," John Mullan, a partner at the law firm representing Herd, [told BuzzFeed](#) in September 2014. "She is proud of her role as a cofounder of Tinder and of the role she played in the app's success. She is now pleased to be able to focus her energy, talents, and ideas on exciting new opportunities." With the lawsuit settled for "an undisclosed sum," Herd, ousted from a company she helped start, founded Bumble months later. Reports that have emerged since the settlement have claimed Herd received [\\$1 million](#) from Match Group Inc.

Bumble also launched social app BumbleBFF and professional marketing app BumbleBizz in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

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Trump Hits The Green Amid Reports of His Displeasure With Impeachment Defense  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Former US President Donald Trump is accused of inciting a mob of supporters who stormed the US Capitol building on January 6 resulting in five deaths. House impeachment managers wrapped their case against the ex-leader on Thursday, making way for Trump's defense team to present their arguments on Friday.

As impeachment managers presented their arguments on the third day of Trump's second Senate impeachment trial, the former US leader was photographed on Thursday at his Trump National Golf Club in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Trump, who is not required to be present at the trial, [reportedly](#) spent hours at the golf course and appeared to be more concentrated on his game than the ongoing impeachment proceedings.

However, it is worth noting that he did allegedly tune in to the hearing broadcast on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Before wrapping their case against the former US president on Thursday, House impeachment managers highlighted that more than 140 Capitol and Metropolitan police officers were injured during the deadly January 6 incident at the US Capitol building that killed five.

Prosecutors also spoke of the mental health of responding officers in the wake of the riot.

"The mental toll has been significant. Several Capitol Police officers have reportedly threatened self-harm in the days following the riot," proclaimed Rep. David Cicilline (D-RI) during a nearly four-minute presentation Thursday. "In one case, an officer voluntarily turned in her gun because she was afraid of what might happen."

Trump's defense team is set to present their case on Friday. The former US president's lawyers have previously claimed - to no avail - that the trial should not take place because Trump is now a private citizen rather than an elected official.

Citing individuals familiar with the matter, [Politico reported](#) earlier this week that Trump was growing increasingly frustrated with his defense team.

"Trump was not happy with the performance of his legal team in action," one unnamed source told the outlet, speaking of the opening day of Trump's unprecedented second impeachment trial.

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RPT - Hundreds of Canadian Small Businesses Defy Lockdown Orders in Day of Protest  
TORONTO, February 11 (Sputnik) - Hundreds of Canada's small businesses opened their doors in defiance of COVID-19-induced lockdown orders to protest measures they say are causing irreparable damage to proprietorships, livelihoods and eroding civil liberties.

Despite facing steep fines of up to \$79,000, more than 500 small business owners across the country, in at least eight out of ten Canadian provinces, reopened in defiance of strict lockdown measures on Thursday in place across much of the country.

Over 250 businesses made their intention to reopen known publicly, while a few hundred more did so in more covert ways.

Vladislav Sobolev, the founder of the We Are All Essential campaign, which organized the mass action, told Sputnik that frustration among business owners is reaching a boiling point.

"It's insane to think about, we're coming on the one-year anniversary of 'flatten-the-curve' lockdowns," Sobolev said, explaining that if in the initial phase businesses were in the dark about the threats and challenges posed by COVID-19, today companies have an idea about how to mitigate those risks.

We Are All Essential's founder said that he is aware of the risks businesses face by opening up on Thursday but said the day of solidarity will give proprietors a safety net, noting that authorities cannot possibly get through all of the defiant businesses, and added that similar protests abroad have made an impact.

Italy's estimated 300,000 bar and restaurant owners have banded together in an act of defiance, forcing authorities to, largely, stand down, according to reports. Similar protests are now, reportedly, ongoing in Poland and the United Kingdom.

Long-term, Sobolev worries about the lost jobs - business analysts warn of hundreds of thousands of jobs forever lost in the aftermath of the pandemic - as well as the erosion of civil liberties. Sobolev explained that government restrictions are enabling the creation of a dependency culture, which goes against the very independent nature of proprietors.

The 40-year-old business owner warns not only of increased government control and the potential abuses of power that come with it but the decimation of local communities, which rely predominantly on tax streams from small businesses, as opposed to large multinational corporations. As such, the network's founder sees the risk of small businesses being displaced by major corporations, who not only face far fewer restrictions in how they conduct their business but are also the recipients of major government grants and subsidies.

"This is probably the biggest wealth heist in the history of humanity we have seen in the last ten months," Sobolev said. "The corporations... are the ones profiteering tremendously at the expense of hardworking Canadians, and we have to put a stop to this."

Those who did not participate in the protests say that they understand and sympathize with those who took the coordinated stand.

"I definitely understand why a business owner would feel the need to [protest]. For me, the issues are much greater than any message that could be delivered during a single day of defiance," Andrew Kodous, who co-owns the Karnak Cafe in Mississauga, Ontario with his brother, told Sputnik. "I speak for many small business owners when I say the pandemic has absolutely crushed us."

While the government has touted numerous measures designed to get small business owners through the pandemic, Kodous, whose business has essentially been shuttered for over 11 months and has seen a 90 percent revenue drop, said that the measures aren't nearly enough.

"The grants, subsidies and loans that the government has made available to us barely begin to scratch the surface," Kodous says, elaborating that despite the closure, he remains liable for the monthly cost of utilities.

The cafe owner adds that businesses are seeking clarity and transparency from the government in addition to supplementary funds. Kodous says government measures are implemented quickly, often without consultation and can be reversed without notice. He cites an episode last summer, where he and his brother spent nearly \$8,000 to renovate their cafe to comply with new COVID-19 guidelines, only to have the local government change the rules a month later. Kodous says that the mixed messaging from all levels of government makes it impossible to plan ahead, compounding the anxiety.

The frustration and fear among business owners are not unfounded. A sixth of Canadian small businesses impacted by the COVID-19-related restrictions are contemplating closing for good, potentially putting 2.4 million jobs in jeopardy, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) said in a report last month.

The number represents a mid-range estimate of the potential impact of the restrictions and the advocacy says as few as 71,000 or as much as 222,000 businesses could close permanently by the end pandemic in addition to the 58,000 businesses that closed up shop in 2020, the report said.

The CFIB declined Sputnik's request for an interview, only saying that they advise business owners to follow local laws, while the advocacy works to "convince governments to create safe paths for them to reopen."

The office of Mary Ng, the Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade, did not respond to Sputnik's request for an interview.

However, like the protests in Italy, Canada's anti-lockdown grievances appear to be making an impact. In recent weeks provincial governments in Ontario and Alberta have announced the scaling back of some measures.

Ontario began gradually reopening this week, with three public health regions allowed to exit the province-wide lockdown on Wednesday and most other jurisdictions, apart from Toronto and the neighboring regions, expected to join them on February 16.

Martin Masse, the spokesperson for People's Party of Canada leader and a member of the End the Lockdown Caucus Maxime Bernier, warned that various levels of government may choose to reinstitute the measures depending on the progression of the pandemic but that it is nevertheless important to keep the conversation about the issue of lockdowns going.

"For now, the goal is only to have an impact on public opinion, attract more support from representatives and citizens, and show that there is a larger diversity of views on this issue than what we see in the media and establishment political parties," Masse told Sputnik, adding that the movement has Bernier's full support.

Sobolev, meanwhile, echo's Kodous' and Bernier's message saying that progress won't be achieved in a single day of defiance but through persistence day in and day out.

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#### Hundreds of Canadian Small Businesses Defy Lockdown Orders in Day of Protest

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US Not Revising Duties in Boeing-Airbus WTO Dispute - Trade Office Notice

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will not revise duties imposed in the Boeing-Airbus World Trade Organization dispute, a notice to be published in the US Federal Register on Friday revealed.

"The US Trade Representative together with the affected United States industry have agreed that it is unnecessary at this time to revise the action in the Section 301 investigation involving the enforcement of US rights in the World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute involving Large

Civil Aircraft subsidies provided by certain current or former member States of the European Union," the notice, posted on Thursday, said.

The notice said the US Trade Representative will continue to consider the action taken in the Section 301 investigation.

In 2006, the United States filed a case with the WTO accusing European Union aircraft manufacturer Airbus of having received \$22 billion in illegal subsidies. The EU filed a similar counterclaim, launching a long debate, with the WTO having ruled that both sides are illegally subsidizing their respective aircraft companies.

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US Sentences Ukrainian to 7 Years for Role in International Hacking Scheme - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - A US judge sentenced Ukrainian citizen Aleksandr Musienko to more than seven years in prison for role in scheme to launder stolen money for Eastern European hackers, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"A Ukrainian man was sentenced today to 87 months in prison and ordered to pay \$98,751.64 in restitution after pleading guilty to committing wire fraud, stemming from his participation in a scheme to launder funds for Eastern European cybercriminals who hacked into and stole funds from online bank accounts of U.S. businesses," the release said on Thursday.

In March 2019, Musienko, of the Ukrainian city of Odessa, was extradited to the United States from South Korea.

Musienko helped launder \$3 million hacked from US bank accounts between 2009 to 2012, the release said.

In 2011, the bank of a North Carolina-based company targeted by the hackers detected the fraud scheme, the release said. Charges were eventually filed against Musienko in 2016 and he was arrested in South Korea in 2018, the release said.

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Blinken, UN Chief Discuss Commitment to Syria Political Process, WFO Reform - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres reaffirmed their commitment to resolving the conflict in Syria through a political process, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release after the introduction call.

"On Syria, both reaffirmed their commitment to the political process under UN Security Council resolution 2254 and the extension of a cross-border authorization to deliver aid and help relieve the suffering of the Syrian people," Price said on Thursday.

Price added that both officials also discussed efforts to combat the novel coronavirus and reforming the World Health Organization.

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UPDATE - Man Kills Himself Outside US Congresswoman's Home

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - A man killed himself outside the home of US Congresswoman Beth Van Duyne in the state of Texas, Irving Police Department spokesperson Robert Reeves said in a press conference.

"Irving officers were dispatched to the 2100 block of Shamard Oak Lane where an individual had died from suicide on the sidewalk leading up to the front porch of Congresswoman Beth Van Duyne," Reeves said on Thursday.

WFAA reported that police confirmed the man killed, Chris Dillard, worked as a political consultant and was involved in Van Duyne's campaign for Congress.

The congresswoman was at home during the incident on Wednesday afternoon, Reeves said, adding that no one in the home saw the incident take place but they heard the single gunshot. Police officers arrived at the scene and found the deceased man with a hand gun in his possession, Reeves said.

The man did not have a history of mental health issues and the motive for the suicide is unknown at the time, Reeves said.

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Ex-Spokesperson Kills Himself Outside US Congresswoman's Home - Police

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Canadian Government Approves Air Canada Purchase of Competitor Air Transat - Statement

TORONTO, February 11 (Sputnik) - Canadian Transport Minister Omar Alghabra approved the purchase of the country's third-largest airline Air Transat by flag carrier Air Canada.

"Omar Alghabra, Minister of Transport, today announced that the Government of Canada has approved the proposed purchase of Transat A.T. Inc. by Air Canada, subject to strict terms and conditions that are in the interests of Canadians," Transport Canada said in a statement on Thursday.

The coronavirus pandemic played a major role in the decision, with Air Transat facing the possibility of going under in the near future, the statement said.

The deal comes with the stipulation that Air Canada must maintain the company's head office and brand in Quebec and relocate 1,500 employees still on payroll to other departments. Air Transat staffed more than 5,000 employees prior to the pandemic.

Transport Canada said that the issue of outstanding refunds would be addressed during deliberations about the industry bailout package Ottawa has mused about since last spring.

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Senator Urges Biden Administration to Rethink Rules on US University Ties to China- Letter

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's decision to cancel proposed rule on universities' disclosure of financial ties to Confucius Institutes keeps US academia open to Chinese propaganda and spying, Senator Chuck Grassley warned in a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

"It's extremely concerning that the Biden administration has withdrawn the proposed rule that would have required schools to disclose their relationship with Confucius Institutes," Grassley wrote on Thursday.

The public and parents should be able to know whether or not the school their child attends "has a relationship with a Chinese government propaganda machine," the letter said.

Grassley has frequently warned of Chinese challenges to academic freedom as well as to security of taxpayer-funded research and intellectual property.

Grassley's letter cited multiple warnings from US intelligence agencies that China uses the Confucius Institutes to pilfer research and technology from leading American Universities, often by Chinese graduate students before they return home.

Mayorkas canceled the proposed rule that would have required universities and primary schools to disclose their financial ties to Confucius Institutes, the letter said.

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US Taking Immediate Action to Limit Sensitive Exports to Myanmar Military - White House

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department is taking immediate action to limit the shipment of sensitive goods to Myanmar's military following the coup in that country, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said during news conference.

"President [Joe] Biden is taking significant steps in response to the military coup in Burma [Myanmar]," Psaki said on Thursday. "The Department of Commerce is also taking immediate action to limit exports of sensitive goods to the Burmese military and other entities associated with the recent coup."

The Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) announced earlier a series of restrictions on exports of sensitive items to Myanmar's defense and home affairs ministries, armed forces and security services in response to the actions to overthrow the country's democratically elected government.

"By taking immediate action to prevent the Burmese military from benefiting from access to sensitive US technology, we are sending a direct message that the United States stands with the people of Burma [Myanmar] and their lawful democratic institutions," the Commerce Department said, adding it will take all appropriate action to limit such access by those responsible for dismantling the country's democratic institutions.

The statement said, effective immediately, BIS will apply a presumption of denial for items requiring a license for export and re-export to these select Myanmar government departments and agencies.

BIS is also revoking certain previously issued licenses to these departments and agencies which have not been fully utilized, the statement added.

Moreover, the Commerce Department said BIS will suspend certain license exceptions previously available to Myanmar as a result of its current country group placement under the Export Administration Regulations (EAR).

BIS is also assessing additional actions, including possible Entity List additions, adding Burma to the list of countries subject to the EAR's military end use and end user and military intelligence end use and end user restrictions, and downgrading Myanmar's country group status in the EAR, according to the statement.

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US on Track to Have Enough Vaccines for 300M In Americans by End of July - Biden

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is on track to have enough coronavirus vaccine doses to immunize 300 million residents by the end of July, US President Joe Biden said.

"We're now on track to have enough [vaccine] supply for 300 million Americans by the end of July," Biden said in an address to the National Institutes of Health on Thursday.

Biden added that his administration has finalized agreements with vaccine producers Pfizer and Moderna for an additional 100 million doses from each supplier. As part of the deal, both companies will expedite the delivery of 100 million doses, pushing the delivery date forward from June to May.

Biden also said that vaccine deliveries to US states under his administration have increased by nearly 30 percent.

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California Receives \$823M to Open Over 100 COVID-19 Vaccination Sites

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - More than \$800 million from Washington will help California fund 104 sites selected for mass COVID-19 vaccination centers, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said.

"Funds will reimburse expenses for medical and support staff; personal protective equipment; facility costs and supplies required to store, handle, transport and administer vaccines; and efforts to share public information regarding vaccinations," FEMA said in a press release on Thursday.

The \$823 million project is funded through FEMA's Public Assistance program, which provides grants to government organizations and some private nonprofit organizations following a presidential disaster declaration, the release said.

President Joe Biden earlier said the United States is on track to have enough coronavirus vaccine supplies to immunize 300 million residents by the end of July.

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## Biden Says Trump Left Federal COVID-19 Vaccination Program in Worse Shape Than Expected

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said his predecessor Donald Trump left the federal coronavirus vaccination program in worse condition than expected.

"It's no secret that the vaccination program was in much worse shape than my team and I anticipated... While scientists did their job in discovering vaccines in record time, my predecessor, I'll be very blunt about it, did not do his job when getting ready for the massive challenge of vaccinating hundreds of millions of Americans," Biden said after visiting the US National Institutes of Health on Thursday.

Biden said Trump did not order enough vaccines, mobilize enough people to administer shots, or establish federal vaccine centers.

Biden said the United States should have enough coronavirus vaccines for 300 million Americans by the end of July, adding that the federal government recently ordered another 100 million Moderna and 100 million Pfizer vaccines.

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## US on Track to Have Enough Vaccines for 300Mln Americans by End of July - Biden

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is on track to have enough coronavirus vaccine supplies to immunize 300 million residents by the end of July, US President Joe Biden said.

"We're now on track to have enough [vaccine] supply for 300 million Americans by the end of July," Biden said in an address to the National Institutes of Health on Thursday.

Biden added that his administration has finalized agreements with vaccine producers Pfizer and Moderna for an additional 100 million doses from each supplier.

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## Biden Says US Will Not Receive Enough Coronavirus Vaccines By End of Summer

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States will not be able to obtain enough coronavirus vaccines by the end of summer, President Joe Biden said.

"It just not going to be by the end of this summer," Biden said during his visit to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on the issue of vaccines availability on Thursday.

The US president expressed regret that the Trump administration did not provide the Biden administration enough information about vaccines during transition period.

"We were led to believe that there were a lot more vaccines available," Biden said.

The access to vaccines is a giant logistical issue, Biden added.

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**Impeachment Managers End Arguments Against Trump, Defense Set to Take Floor**

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Impeachment managers wrapped up a two-day-long presentation of the case against Donald Trump and called on the US Senate to convict the former president over the Capitol attack and disqualify him from any future public office.

"We humbly, humbly ask you to convict President Trump for the crime, for which he is overwhelmingly guilty of. Because if you don't, if we pretend this didn't happen or, worse, if we let it go unanswered, who is to say it won't happen again?" impeachment manager Joe Neguse said in his closing remarks Thursday.

House managers, who act as prosecutors in the Senate trial, passed the floor to Trump's lawyers. They will take the stage on Friday with up to 16 hours for opening arguments.

Neguse told the senators that the evidence is "clear" - including statements, videos, and affidavits - that prove Trump incited an insurrection which he alone had the power to stop.

"And the fact that he didn't stop it, the fact that he incited a lawless attack and abdicated his duty to defend us from it, the fact that [he] actually further inflamed the mob... more than requires conviction and disqualification," Neguse added.

The defense team, according to CNN, is expected within a single day to present the case for Trump's acquittal paving the way for the senators to debate and vote on the case. The verdict may be passed as early as this weekend and is likely to be in favor of the former president given a lack of a two-thirds majority in the chamber needed for conviction.

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**Bombardier Says Will Cut 1,600 Jobs, End Learjet Production**

TORONTO, February 11 (Sputnik) - Canadian aircraft manufacturer Bombardier is slashing 1,600 jobs and is winding down production of the Learjet line of aircraft, the company said in press release announcing the 2020 financial results.

"Bombardier has and will be launching a number of actions to improve profitability and cash generation," the release said on Thursday. "Specific actions include... reducing its overall workforce by approximately 1,600 positions."

As part of the cost-cutting measures, Bombardier President and CEO Eric Martel announced that the company is also ending production of its iconic Learjet line, which has been a business aviation staple since 1963. Production will cease in the fourth quarter of 2021.

The financial results showed that while revenues grew up 3 percent year-over-year, the company still recorded a net loss of \$568 million in 2020.

The cuts are part of an effort to save \$400 million annually by 2023, the statement said. The company has faced a backlash from Canadians after receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer-funded bailouts over the past several years.

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Twitter to Identify Social Media Accounts Tied to Governments, Officials - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Twitter announced in a statement that it will identify any governments or officials from most countries that are associated with online accounts beginning on Wednesday.

"In August 2020, we expanded account labels to two additional categories: 1) the accounts of key government officials and 2) accounts belonging to state-affiliated media entities. Included in this initial action were accounts from countries represented in the five permanent members of the UN Security Council," the statement said on Thursday.

On February 17, Twitter will expand those labels to accounts from Group of Seven (G7) countries and to a majority of countries that the company has attributed state-linked information operations to, the statement explained.

The first countries to be identified by Twitter as being associated with online social accounts last August were China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States - the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the statement said.

Phase 2 countries to be added to the identification program next week will be Canada, Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, Germany, Honduras, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Spain, Thailand Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, the statement added.

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US Air Force Launches 'Conversations' to Combat Extremism Among Personnel - Commanders

WASHINGTON, February 11 Sputnik) - US Air and Space Force commanders and senior enlisted leaders must engage personnel in a series of conversations to combat extremism, Acting Secretary of the Air Force John Rush, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Clarence Brown and Chief of Space Operations Gen. John Raymond said in a memorandum.

"Commanders and senior enlisted leaders will engage airmen and guardians about the threat extremism poses to the Department of the Air Force, our Nation and our democracy," the memorandum said. on Thursday. "Supporting guidance on this stand down will be made available no later than February 23."

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has announced that combating extremism in the US armed forces will be a top priority for the Department of Defense.

"It is our obligation to stand against extremism, as we should with anything that threatens to undermine good order and discipline, trust and our culture of respect," the memorandum said. The Department of the Air Force will also carry out a comprehensive assessment of the issue, the Defense Department added.

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#### Facebook 'Community Standards' Report Shows 25% Drop in 2020 Hate Speech

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The number of times Facebook users viewed hate speech on the platform in the final three months of 2020 fell about 25 percent from the third quarter, even as the number of offensive posts increased, according to Facebook's latest Community Standards Enforcement Report.

"This quarter, hate speech prevalence dropped from 0.10-0.11 percent to 0.07-0.08 percent, or seven to eight views of hate speech for every 10,000 views of content. The prevalence of violent and graphic content also dropped from 0.07 percent to 0.05 percent and adult nudity content dropped from 0.05-0.06 percent to 0.03-0.04 percent," a press release explaining the report said on Thursday.

While the metrics appear confusing at first glance, Facebook said the data measures the number of times people see content on the platform. In absolute terms, the volume of offensive posts increased, due to improvements in methods to detect content that Facebook wants to eliminate from its platform.

For example, the firm founds 26.9 million pieces of hate speech, up from 22.1 million in Q3, due in part to updates in our technology in Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese, the release said.

Facebook also said it found 6.3 million pieces of bullying and harassment content, up from 3.5 million in the third quarter, which it attributed to updated detection technology.

In addition, the platform found 2.5 million pieces of suicide and self-injury content, up from 1.3 million in the previous quarter due to increased reviewer capacity.

The release included similar data from Facebook's Instagram subsidiary.

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#### Five Alleged Proud Boys Charged With 'Conspiracy' in Capitol Incident - Criminal Complaint

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Five alleged members of the group Proud Boys have been charged in connection to the January 6 incident at the US Capitol, a criminal complaint revealed.

"Based on the foregoing, your Affiant submits that there is probable cause to believe that William Chrestman, Christopher Kuehne, Louis Enrique Colon, Felicia Konold, and Cory Konold each did violate [US law] by conspiring together, and with others known and unknown, to

corruptly obstruct, influence, or impede an official proceeding before Congress, that is, the certification of the Electoral College, and to obstruct impede, or interfere with a law enforcement officer during the commission of a civil disorder," the complaint said on Thursday.

The complaint said the individuals appeared to have been associated with the Proud Boys group based on evidence on social media and media footage from the Capitol on January 6. The individuals have also been charged with entering the Capitol building without lawful authority and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds.

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US Justice Dept. Probes Fraud Suspicions in GameStop's Rapid Stock Rise - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US Department of Justice and California state investigators are probing suspicions that market manipulation and other types of fraud were involved in the rapid rise in value of GameStop and AMC Entertainment shares in January, the Wall Street Journal said in a reported.

The Justice Department's fraud section and the San Francisco US attorney's office have been investigating the case and interviewing brokers and executives of social-media companies that were centers of the trading frenzy, the report said on Thursday.

Federal and state prosecutors in the investigation have subpoenaed information from brokers including Robinhood Markets, a popular online brokerage that many individual investors used to trade GameStop and other shares, the report said.

GameStop shares soared from around \$20 to \$483 over only two weeks in January but now the stock has fallen back to a value of around \$50 per share, the report added.

In a separate investigation, the Commodity Futures Trading Commission has initiated a preliminary investigation into whether misconduct took place when Reddit traders targeted silver futures and the largest exchange-traded fund tied to silver, the iShares Silver Trust, according to the report.

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Biden Admin. Forms Climate Innovation Group, Earmarks \$100Bln for Research - White House

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The White House on Thursday established a new climate innovation working group and earmarked \$100 billion in Energy Department funding for research on emission reducing technology.

"The working group will help coordinate and strengthen federal government-wide efforts to foster affordable, game-changing technologies that can help America achieve the President's goal of net zero economy-wide emissions by 2050," the White House said in a press release on Thursday.

The White House also announced \$100 billion in funding from the Energy Department to develop at least ten technologies with the promise of reducing climate warming initiatives. The technologies include zero net carbon buildings made with carbon-neutral construction materials, sustainable fuel for planes and ships, as well as carbon-capture retrofits for existing industrial and power plant exhausts, the release said. Much of the research would likely be conducted by a planned Advanced Research Projects Agency-Climate (ARPA-C) organization that Biden pledged to create earlier, the release added.

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US Has Ongoing Concerns Over China's Activities With Confucius Institutes - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration shares the concerns of its predecessors regarding China's activities involving Confucius institutes in the United States, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said during a press briefing.

The Trump administration branded the Confucius institutes as foreign missions, with former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo saying they are part of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) global influence and propaganda apparatus.

"When it comes to the Confucius institutes, we have ongoing concerns about activities of the CCP, including through these institutes, given they might affect academic freedom in the United States," Price said on Thursday, while denying reports that the Biden administration had withdrawn the designation.

The Trump administration proposed a rule that would require US educational institutions to report whether they have a relationship with Confucius institutes.

Price added that the Trump administration never submitted the rule to the Federal Register because Trump's Office of Management and Budget never completed its review of the draft rule.

However, Price said Biden froze all regulatory processing of Trump-era policies that got stuck during the transition of power, which means that draft rule was withdrawn from the review process and would need to be resubmitted.

Price did not confirm whether the Trump rule would resubmitted for review, but he added that concerns over Confucius institutes would be addressed as the administration looks at how best to respond to China's information operations.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik)

US-CHINA RELATIONS

\* US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he held a telephone conversation with Chinese leader Xi Jinping that lasted two hours.

\* Biden vowed to pursue practical, result-oriented engagements in line with the interests of the American people and their allies.

\* Xi told Biden the United States and China should work together to protect peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and any differences should be resolved on the basis of mutual respect and equality.

\* Xi said the issues of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Xinjiang are China's internal affair and called for respecting its interests.

#### US MEASURES AGAINST MYANMAR

\* The US Commerce Department is taking immediate action to limit the shipment of sensitive goods to the Myanmar military following the coup in the Southeast Asian country, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

\* The United States redirected more than \$42 million in assistance to Myanmar's government in light of the coup, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) said.

\* The United States has introduced sanctions against ten persons and three entities over the coup in Myanmar, the US Secretary of State said.

#### EU-UKRAINE PARTNERSHIP

\* The European Union is ready to help Ukraine embark on an "important energy transition" that foresees the country shifting from Russian gas supplies, the bloc's top diplomat Josep Borrell said on Thursday.

\* The European Union has already offered Ukraine assistance in procuring coronavirus vaccines through the World Health Organization-led COVAX Facility, and Brussels is looking for ways to establish a vaccine sharing mechanism at the EU level, Borrell said.

\* Borrell said that Brussels and Kiev had reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen bilateral ties after holding a meeting with Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal.

#### OPEC REPORT ON OIL MARKETS

\* The compliance of the OPEC member states with the oil cuts agreement increased to 108 percent last month, compared to the 102 percent in December, the figures from the fresh OPEC report indicated on Thursday.

\* OPEC slightly revised down forecast for global demand growth in 2021 to 5.8 million barrels a day as the extended lockdowns are expected to affect the consumption in the first half of the year.

\* OPEC revised down forecast for the US crude oil production this year and now expects it to decline by 70,000 barrels a day year-on-year due to the remaining COVID-19 uncertainties and the capital expenditure issues, experienced by the US energy sector.

#### LUKASHENKO ON SITUATION IN BELARUS

\* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Wednesday that the draft version of a new constitution would be put to a referendum early next year.

\* Lukashenko expressed the belief that his country should remain a presidential republic, while the constitution should be amended, since the presidential powers that it currently provisions are too broad.

\* Lukashenko said he would only retire from politics if no rallies were held in the country and safety of his supporters was guaranteed.

\* Belarus attaches importance to relations with the European Union, but believes that Russia will always remain the key economic partner and strategic ally, Lukashenko said.

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US to Engage China When in US Interest, Still in Early Stages of Engagement - State Dept.

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"We will engage the Chinese when it is consistent with our interests, when it is in our interest and consistent with our values," Price said in a press briefing.

Price added that the Biden administration is still in the early stages of engagement with Beijing and too early to discuss the US framework on China.

On Wednesday, President Joe Biden held his first telephone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, during which he expressed concerns over Chinese policy and vowed to protect the security of US citizens.

Biden brought up issues concerning Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, bilateral trade relations, preventing weapons proliferation, among other matters.

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US Impeachment Prosecutor Says Foreign Spies May Have Infiltrated Capitol During Unrest

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Impeachment manager Joaquin Castro told the US Senate on Thursday that foreign spies may have infiltrated the Capitol building or conspired with President Donald Trump's supporters during last month's riot.

"We can't be certain if and how many foreign spies infiltrated this building or at least coordinated with those who did," Castro said in his speech at the impeachment trial.

He repeated allegations that one of the attackers intended to send a computer device stolen from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to a friend in Russia, who then planned to sell it to SVR, Russia's foreign intelligence service.

"Our intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies have the burden to figure out exactly what was stolen, taken, ransacked and compromised... These investigations are necessary now because of the actions of President Trump," Castro said.

The congressman added that the assault exposed vulnerabilities of the Capitol.

"Think about it. Every foreign adversary considering [an] attack on this building got to watch a dress rehearsal. And they saw that this Capitol could be overtaken," Castro said.

The attack also damaged US international standing, he added.

"Russian, Iranian, and Chinese influence actors have seized the opportunity to amplify narratives in furtherance of their policy interest," the congressman said, citing a January 14 State Department threat assessment.

"They are using President Trump's incitement to an insurrection to declare that democracy is over... We cannot let them use what happened on January 6 to define us, who we are, and what we stand for. We get to define ourselves by how we respond to the attack of January 6," Castro said, adding that even US allies were "speaking up" after the Capitol violence.

House impeachment managers, who act as prosecutors, are wrapping up their presentation of the case at the Senate for Trump's conviction on the incitement of insurrection charges. The allegations have been flatly denied by the former president and his lawyers, who are expected to take the floor on Friday.

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US Approves \$60M In Sale of Air Training Center to Jordan - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The Department of State has approved the sale of a US air training combat center for F-16 pilots, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a press release on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Jordan of an F-16 Air Combat Training Center and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$60 million," the release said.

The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying Congress of the possible sale on Thursday, the release explained.

The sales package will include "full mission trainers, combat tactics trainers, instructor/operator stations, tactical environment simulators, brief/debrief stations, scenario generation stations, database generation stations, mission observation centers, and other training center equipment and support," the release said.

It will also contain software and software support, publications and technical documentation; maintenance, spares and repair parts and services; US and contractor engineering, technical, and logistical support services, the release added.

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US Condemns China's Decision to Ban BBC World - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has denounced the decision by China to ban BBC World and urged Beijing to provide full access to both internet and media, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We absolutely condemn the PRC's decision to ban BBC World News," Price said. "The PRC maintains one of the most controlled, most oppressive, least free information spaces in the world... We call on the PRC and other nations with authoritarian controls over their population to allow the full access to the internet and media."

Earlier in Thursday, China's National Radio and Television Administration announced that BBC World News would be banned from air for at least one year. The regulator cited concerns over the UK broadcaster's impartiality and violations of regulations governing foreign media outlets. The regulator said it would not accept BBC World News' application for broadcast in China in the new year.

The announcement came overnight into the Chinese New Year celebrated this Friday.

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said China's decision was "unacceptable."

One week ago, UK regulators revoked the license of state-owned China Global Television Network (CGTN) broadcaster. In a statement, Britain's communications regulator Ofcom said the company that owns CGTN's UK license does not have effective oversight and day-to-day editorial control over what the broadcaster airs.

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US Probing What Sickened Diplomatic Staff in Cuba - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is working in identifying the causes that made the diplomatic personnel in Cuba sick, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"The US government is working to determine what happened to our staff and their families and to ensure the wellbeing and health of our officials going forward," Price said. "That investigation remains underway. It remains a high priority." During the transition period that was one of the first comprehensive briefings then Secretary -designate Blinken requested of the transition and has received updates as Secretary of State and will continue to get them going forward.

In August 2017, the State Department said nearly two dozen diplomats working at the US embassy in Cuba were affected in an incident involving a mysterious audio device and some of the diplomats suffered permanent hearing loss and possible brain injuries.

The Cuban government has denied any involvement in the incidents.

In 2018, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the State Department had established a task force to respond to the mysterious acoustic incidents overseas.

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**US Budget Deficit to Reach \$2.3 Trillion in 2021, 107% of GDP in 2031 - Economic Outlook**

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The US budget deficit is projected to reach \$2.3 trillion in 2021 and can increase to 107 percent of GDP in 2031, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said in its economic outlook released on Thursday.

"CBO projects that, under current law, the federal budget deficit would total \$2.3 trillion in 2021 and \$12.3 trillion over the following 10 years. Federal debt would reach 107 percent of GDP in 2031, the highest level in US history," the economic outlook said.

The deficit in 2021 would be the second largest since 1945.

"Those deficits, which were already projected to be large by historical standards before the onset of the 2020–2021 coronavirus pandemic, have widened significantly as a result of the economic disruption caused by the pandemic and the enactment of legislation in response," the report added.

The US economy will return to its prepandemic levels by the middle of the year, while GDP is projected to grow by 3.7 percent in 2021, CBO said. Average GDP growth in the coming four years can reach 2.6 percent, while the unemployment rate will gradually decline through 2026, it added.

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**US Condemns Russia's Crackdown on Jehovah's Witnesses - State Dept**

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States strongly condemns Russia's actions against Jehovah's witnesses (a religious sect, banned in Russia), US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

A Russian court on Wednesday sentenced a 63-year-old follower of Jehovah's Witnesses Alexander Ivshin to 7.5 years in prison following a criminal investigation and conviction. In April 2017, Jehovah's Witnesses was banned in Russia over extremism and incitement of religious hatred.

"The United States condemns Russia's continued crackdown on Jehovah's witnesses and other peaceful religious minorities in the strongest possible terms," Price said.

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US Redirects \$42.4Mln in Myanmar Aid After Coup - USAID

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States redirected more than \$42 million in assistance to Myanmar's government in light of the coup, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) said in a statement on Thursday.

"Following the US Government's determination on February 2, 2021 that the Burmese military's actions constitute a coup, USAID conducted a thorough review of our assistance to Burma [Myanmar]," the release said. "As a result, USAID is immediately redirecting \$42.4 million of assistance away from work that would have benefited the Government of Burma. Rather than supporting the military, we will redirect these funds to support and strengthen civil society."

The agency pointed out that it will continue its support to the people with about \$69 million in bilateral programs.

"In particular, we will continue working to maintain and improve the health of the people of Burma, including by combating COVID-19, and strengthen the ability of civil society to guard democratic space, foster food security, support independent media, and promote peace and reconciliation in conflict-affected regions," it explained.

Moreover, Washington will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Rohingya and other populations including in Chin, Kachin, Rakhine, and Shan states, and the region, the release added.

The Myanmar coup unfolded on February 1 as the military arrested senior members of the newly-elected parliament right before it was due to convene for an inaugural session. State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and others were put under house arrest. The military declared a state of emergency for one year, pledging to hold a new election after it expires.

The Myanmar public reacted by taking to the streets en masse to demand that the military yield power to civilian rule. Rallies continue to be held in large cities for the sixth consecutive day now, featuring brutal use of force by law enforcement. On Wednesday, a 19-year-old female protester was shot dead by the police in the country's capital, Naypyidaw.

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## Biden COVID-19 Relief Bill to Include Minimum Wage Increase to \$15 - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's COVID-19 relief bill to be presented to Congress later this month will include his plan to increase the US minimum wage to \$15 per hour in the next four years, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told a news conference on Thursday.

"Yes, it will," Pelosi said in response to a question on whether the minimum wage increase will be included in the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package. "Millions of people will get a raise and 70 percent of them will be women."

The US minimum wage currently stands at \$7.25 per hour and Biden's plan seeks to raise it to \$15 by June of 2025.

Aside from Republican senators, business owners and captains of industry have argued that such a hike would put a damper on the economy and ultimately defeat efforts to reach full employment when the country recovers from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Those arguments were somewhat backed by the bipartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) which said on Monday that the doubling of the minimum wage could raise unemployment by an estimated 1.4 million. The CBO said such a hike could also expand the US budget deficit by \$54 billion in the decade between 2021 and 2031.

The US budget deficit currently stands at \$736 billion, after growing by \$163 billion in the first four months of fiscal 2021, the Treasury Department said in its monthly balance sheet reported Wednesday.

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## Capitol Rioters Believed Trump Invited Them, Regret 'Cascades' - Impeachment Prosecutor

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Democratic impeachment prosecutors on Thursday argued that the Capitol rioters acted on Donald Trump's marching orders and not for their own reasons as alleged by the defense.

House impeachment managers, who act as prosecutors, are wrapping up their presentation of the case at the Senate for Trump's conviction on the incitement of insurrection charges. The allegations have been flatly denied by the former president and his lawyers, who are expected to take the floor on Friday.

"That's just not the case [that they acted on their own]. It's not what the insurrectionists actually said. They said they came here because the president instructed them to do so... he invited them with clear instructions for a specific time and place and with clear orders to fight to stop the certification in Congress by any means necessary," Impeachment manager Diana DeGette said. "As more and more of these people have been charged, the confession and the regret simply cascades. More and more insurrectionists are admitting that they came at Trump's direction." The congresswoman also provided numerous videos and quotes to support her point. "You don't have to take my word for it that the insurrectionists acted at Donald Trump's direction. They said so," she said.

Lead impeachment manager Jamie Raskin accused Trump of cultivating for months "America's most dangerous extremist groups" with "corrosive lies and violent rhetoric." He showed several videos that captured physical attacks on Trump's opponents over recent years and the former president's own remarks that purportedly encouraged violence.

"Get them the hell out of here, please. Throw them out... Knock the crap out of them. I'll pay for the legal fees. I promise," Trump was recorded saying during his supporters' gatherings.

Raskin sought to prove that Trump was fully aware of his fans' loyalty and the violent nature of their radical wing.

"And he knew that his most hardcore supporters were willing to direct violence at elected officials, to attack and lay siege to a Capitol building. And he knew they would be ready to heed his call on January 6 to stop the steal by violence to block the peaceful transfer of power in the United States. He knew they were coming, he brought them here and he welcomed them with open arms," he said.

Trump's lawyers defended his vocal refusal to concede elections and an appeal to his supporters to "fight like hell" as constitutionally protected free speech. They argued that Trump could not foresee violence and moved to denounce it swiftly.

In their speeches to the Senate impeachment managers also claimed that Trump "is not showing remorse, he is showing defiance." They warned that more violence is possible unless action is taken.

The defense team will take the floor on Friday and, according to CNN, is expected within a single day to present the case for acquittal paving the way for the senators to debate and vote on the case. The verdict may be passed as early as this weekend and is likely to be in favor of Trump given a lack of a two-thirds majority in the chamber needed for conviction.

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Twenty-Two States Back UNHRC Resolution Deploing Coup in Myanmar - UK Mission

UNITED NATIONS, February 11 (Sputnik) - A total of 22 countries at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) have already co-sponsored draft resolution that deplores the recent military coup in Myanmar, head of Public Affairs at the United Kingdom Mission to the United Nations in Geneva Ravini Senanayake told Sputnik on Thursday.

"Twenty-two countries have now come on board," Senanayake said when asked how many countries have co-sponsored so far the document drafted jointly by the United Kingdom and the European Union.

The resolution will be submitted for a vote at the 47-member Human Rights Council on Friday after holding a special session on the human rights situation in Myanmar during the ongoing crisis.

The draft document "strongly deplores" the seizure of power by the military in Myanmar and calls on it to urgently release of all those it had detained, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint.

The Human Rights Council urges the military and security forces to show utmost restraint and refrain from any violence against peaceful protesters and calls for the immediate lifting of restrictions on the internet and telecommunication services.

Holding the session on Myanmar was supported by 51 countries, including the United States that rejoined the Human Rights Council earlier this week as an observer state.

The Myanmar coup unfolded on February 1 as the military arrested senior members of the newly-elected parliament right before it was due to issue Executive Order Soon to

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#### Review Semiconductor Shortage - White House

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will issue an executive order in the coming weeks to address a semiconductor shortage that is hurting the US automotive industry, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Thursday.

After the coronavirus pandemic hit the auto industry last year, the semiconductor industry reassigned production to other sectors, such as consumer electronics. Automotive output has since grown significantly, running into a shortage of crucial electronic parts.

"The longstanding issue was short supply of semiconductors...[it] is one of the central motivations for the executive order the president will sign in the coming weeks to undertake a comprehensive review of supply chains for critical goods," Psaki said.

The review will focus on identifying immediate actions the administration can take to address the semiconductor shortage, such as improving the physical production of those items in the United States to working with allies to develop a coordinated response to resolve the problem, she added.

Psaki said the Biden administration is currently identifying potential choke-points in supply chain and working with key stakeholders in the industry and trade partners "to do more now."

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#### US Budget Deficit to Reach \$2.3 Trillion in 2021, 107% of GDP in 2031 - Economic Outlook

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The US budget deficit is projected to reach \$2.3 trillion in 2021 and can increase to 107 percent of GDP in 2031, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said in its economic outlook released on Thursday.

"CBO projects that, under current law, the federal budget deficit would total \$2.3 trillion in 2021 and \$12.3 trillion over the following 10 years. Federal debt would reach 107 percent of GDP in 2031, the highest level in US history," the economic outlook said.

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US Redirects \$42.4Mln in Myanmar Aid After Coup - USAID

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States redirected more than \$42 million in assistance to Myanmar's government in light of the coup, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) said in a statement on Thursday.

"Following the US Government's determination on February 2, 2021 that the Burmese military's actions constitute a coup, USAID conducted a thorough review of our assistance to Burma [Myanmar]," the release said. "As a result, USAID is immediately redirecting \$42.4 million of assistance away from work that would have benefited the Government of Burma. Rather than supporting the military, we will redirect these funds to support and strengthen civil society."

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US Solicits Plans Sale of 10Mln Barrels From Strategic Petroleum Reserve - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States began soliciting bids for 10.1 million barrels of oil from the nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve, an Energy Department sales notice said on Thursday.

"This notice of sale is to fulfill the requirements of Section 403(a)(4) of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015 (5 million barrels) and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 (5.1 million barrels), which combined require a mandatory sale of 10.1 million barrels during FY 2021," the notice said.

Oil will be sold from three Strategic Petroleum Reserve sites: Bryan Mound, Big Hill and West Hackberry.

The Strategic Petroleum Reserve is the world's largest supply of emergency crude oil, and the federally owned oil stocks are stored in underground salt caverns at four storage sites in Texas and Louisiana, according to the Energy Department.

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US Imposes Myanmar Sanctions on 10 Individuals, 3 Entities Over Coup - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States sanctioned ten individuals affiliated with Myanmar's military, plus three entities, in response to the February 1 coup in which State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and other democratically elected officials were arrested, the US State and Treasury departments announced on Thursday.

"Today, the United States is responding by designating the six current and former military officers who led the coup, as well as four members of the newly established State Administrative Council and three business entities that are owned or controlled by the military," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a press release.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a separate release that the Biden administration is prepared to take additional action.

"If there is more violence against peaceful protesters, the Burmese [Myanmar] military will find that today's sanctions are just the first," Yellen said.

Statements from both departments demanded that Myanmar's military regime relinquish power, restore the democratically elected government, release Suu Kyi and other prisoners, lift telecommunications and social media restrictions and refrain from violence against tens of thousands who have joined protests in recent days.

Sanctioned individuals include Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing and his deputy Soe Win, while all three sanctioned entities specialized in gems and jewelry, the Treasury Department said.

The sanctions freeze all property in the United States or controlled by Americans and prohibit financial dealings with US persons without Treasury approval.

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**UNRWA Asks for \$1.5Bln to Support Palestinian Refugees in 2021 - Statement**

UNITED NATIONS, February 11 (Sputnik) - The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in a statement on Thursday appealed for \$1.5 billion to continue to run its humanitarian assistance programs throughout 2021.

"The UNRWA is calling for US\$ 1.5 billion to fund its essential services, emergency appeals and priority projects for registered Palestine refugees in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria," the statement said.

\$806 million of the money requested, the release added, will help to fund core UNRWA services, including supporting schools, training programs for young Palestinians, health centers, providing cash assistance, social services, and camp improvement.

Some \$231 million is needed to respond to the effects of the blockade and occupation of the Palestinian territories, where the humanitarian situation has significantly deteriorated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The requested money will help provide food to some 1.25 million vulnerable refugees.

UNRWA will allocate \$318 million to support 418,000 vulnerable Palestine refugees residing in Syria, 257,000 refugees in Lebanon and 138,000 in Jordan, the statement said. Besides, approximately \$170 million are needed to repair or build UNRWA facilities and improve core services.

The agency in the statement urged its donors to provide the necessary funding to enable UNRWA to fulfill its mandate and avert financial hurdles, following an unprecedented cash crisis last year.

UNRWA still has not received \$75 million needed to fund programs throughout 2020.

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Austin, Polish Defense Minister Discuss New START, Strategic Partnership - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin discussed with his Polish counterpart Mariusz Błaszczak over the telephone the extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) treaty and the presence of US forces in Poland, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.

"The Secretary and the Minister discussed a range of issues, including Poland's commitment to defense modernization, US forces presence in Poland and the extension of the New START treaty," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The two officials exchanged views on the issue of regional security as well as highlighted the significance of US-Poland defense cooperation agreement and the strengthening of bilateral military relations, Kirby also said.

"The enduring presence of the US rotational forces in Poland enhances NATO interoperability, strengthens defense and deterrence along NATO flank," Kirby added.

Austin and Błaszczak agreed to continue discussions on the issue of European security in the future, according to Kirby.

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US Taking Immediate Action to Limit Sensitive Exports to Myanmar Military - White House

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department is taking immediate action to limit the shipment of sensitive goods to the Myanmar military following the coup in the Southeast Asian country, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"President [Joe] Biden is taking significant steps in response to the military coup in Burma," Psaki told a news conference. "The Department of Commerce is also taking immediate action to limit exports of sensitive goods to the Burmese military and other entities associated with the recent coup."

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Biden Looks Forward to Speaking With Israel's Netanyahu Soon - White House

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is looking forward to talks with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the near future, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"The president looks forward to speaking with Prime Minister Netanyahu. He is obviously somebody that he has a long-standing relationship with and obviously there is an important relationship that the United States has with Israel on the security front and as a key partner in the region," Psaki said. "He'll be talking to him soon. I don't have a specific date or time for you on that call yet."

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**Biden to Speak on Transatlantic Ties at February 19 Munich Security Summit - White House**

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will give a speech on transatlantic relations and security issues at the upcoming Munich Security Conference, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"We are also pleased to announce that the President will speak on the importance of our transatlantic ties and the need for the United States and Europe to take on global challenges together at a virtual event hosted by the Munich Security Conference on February 19," Psaki told reporters.

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**Pelosi Says She Hopes US House Will Pass COVID-19 Relief Bill by End of February**

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday that she hoped to have the COVID-19 relief bill finalized and passed by the end of this month so it can become a law before mid-March, when unemployment benefits expire for millions of Americans.

"We hope to have this all done by the end of February, for it certainly to be on the president's desk by that time, to offset the March 14th deadline when some unemployment benefits will expire," Pelosi told a news conference.

President Joe Biden and his Democrat colleagues in the US House of Representatives, led by Pelosi, are pushing to have a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill passed with or without support from rival Republican senators in Congress.

Pelosi said the American people need substantive and urgent financial help and referred to remarks by Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell from the previous day that the United States could not possibly recover from the coronavirus pandemic without adequate government support.

Powell said the United States was still very far from a strong jobs market due to the protracted coronavirus crisis.

Achieving maximum employment would require supportive monetary policy and contributions from across government and private sector, Powell added.

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#### US Troops Will Continue Deployment at Border With Mexico - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US troops will continue their deployment on the border with Mexico regardless of the Biden administration's decision to terminate the Trump-era national emergency on the border, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"It won't have an immediate impact, that mission is funded through the rest of the year so I don't have any changes to that mission to readout as a result of the president's decision," Kirby told reporters when asked if the decision to end the 2019 national emergency had any implications on troop deployments on the border.

Earlier on Thursday, the White House said President Joe Biden informed Congress that he terminated the Trump administration's national emergency at the US southern border and halted the diversion of funds for the construction of new border wall.

Biden said it would be the policy of his administration "that no more American taxpayer dollars be diverted to construct a border wall," adding that he had directed his team to conduct "a careful review" of all resources that have been redirected for that purpose.

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#### Biden, Senators Begin Planning Infrastructure Re-Building Strategy in Oval Office Meeting

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris met with Senators from the Environment and Public Works Committee in the Oval Office to explore plans to upgrade the nation's aging infrastructure, the White House said Thursday.

"[The group] established the mutual understanding that America needs to build new infrastructure across urban and rural areas and create millions of good-paying jobs in the process to support the country's economic recovery in the months and years ahead," the White House said in a statement.

The session, which included lawmakers from both parties, also yielded a "deep commitment to working across the aisle to deliver infrastructure and jobs to American communities," the White House added.

Estimates needed to repair and modernize the nations roads, bridges, ports and other infrastructure typically range in the trillions of dollars. However, past efforts to enact infrastructure legislation have stalled in Congress.

The president also shared the administration's vision for infrastructure that will withstand the impacts of climate change and fuel an American clean energy revolution, the White House said.

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US Imposes Myanmar Sanctions on 8 individuals, 3 Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has introduced sanctions against eight persons and 3 entities over the crisis in Myanmar, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Thursday.

All the eight individuals are generals in the Myanmar military, the Treasury Department said. The sanctions also target Cancri Gems and Jewelry Co. Ltd. , Myanmar Imperial Jade Co., Ltd. and Myanmar Ruby Enterprise - all of which are based in the country, the Treasury Department added.

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Biden Says China Will 'Eat Our Lunch' if US Rail, Auto Industries Do Not Move Fast

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday the US railway and automobile industries had to move fast to match new initiatives in China, warning that Beijing will otherwise "eat our lunch."

Relaying the gist of his two-hour phone call with President Xi Jinping from the previous night, Biden told reporters that China already has "a major new initiative on rail" and their automobile industry is "already there and so is their labor."

"I'm telling you if we don't get moving, they're going to eat our lunch," Biden said.

The US president said China has been making massive investments in projects that relate to transportation and the environment, among others.

"We just have to step up," Biden said.

With respect to Beijing's railway initiatives, Biden said China already has "a rail that moves at 225 miles an hour in the East" he said.

In addition, the Chinese automobile industry was also progressing quickly, along with its labor force, Biden said.

"They're working very hard to try to move into a position where they end up being a source of a new way in which to power automobiles," he added.

Biden said he had assembled a group of lawmakers from relevant transportation sectors, who were with him at Thursday's news conference, to figure out "how we begin this."

"I've laid out what I think we have to do and what should be doing," Biden said.

The US automotive industry has been struggling to regain sales since a 38 percent year-on-year plunge in demand in March 2020 at the height of the coronavirus outbreak.

On the railway front, the United States still has the largest national rail market in the world, mostly made up of freight.

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#### Day 3 of Trump's Impeachment Trial Begins at US Senate

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's impeachment trial continues into the third day at the Senate on Thursday with House managers having another eight hours or so to finish laying out arguments for his conviction over last month's attack on the Capitol.

House managers, who act as prosecutors, will zero in on Trump's "lack of remorse" for a violent attempt by his supporters to stop the congressional certification of his election loss to Joe Biden, CNN reported.

The defense team will take the floor on Friday and, according to the broadcaster, is expected within a single day to present the case for acquittal paving the way for the Senators to debate and vote on the case.

The verdict may be passed as early as this weekend and is likely to be in favor of Trump given a lack of a two-thirds majority in the chamber needed for conviction.

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#### US Indicts Michigan Man on Hate Crime Charges for Attack on Black Teens - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - A 42-year-old man faces hate crime charges over attacks on two African-American teens on a beach in the US state of Michigan, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"[Lee] Mouat repeatedly used racial slurs and said that Black people had no right to use the public beach where the incident occurred. Mouat then struck one of the teens in the face with a bike lock, knocking out several of the victim's teeth and fracturing his jaw," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The two-count indictment accuses Mouat of "willfully causing bodily injury to a Black teenager and attempting to cause bodily injury to another Black teenager, through the use of a dangerous weapon, because of the teenagers' race," the release said.

The attack took place in June when two groups of people - one Black and the other White - were swimming at a public beach in a state park. As the groups emerged from the water, insults reportedly were exchanged before Mouat went to the car to get the bike lock used in the attack, according to local media.

The injured victim, Devin Freelon, has since recovered, the report said.

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### Biden Says Phone Call With China's Xi Lasted 2 Hours

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he held a telephone conversation with Chinese leader Xi Jinping that lasted two hours.

"Last night, I was on the phone for two straight hours with Xi Jinping," Biden told reporters at the White House. "This was a good conversation."

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### Biden Informs Congress on Halt to Wall Construction on Southern US Border – Letter

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden has informed Congress that he terminated the national emergency at the southern border and halted the diversion of funds for the construction of a wall by his predecessor Donald Trump, the text of a letter released by the White House on Thursday said.

"I hereby report that I have issued a proclamation that terminates the national emergency first declared in Proclamation 9844 of February 15, 2019 (Declaring a National Emergency Concerning the Southern Border of the United States)," Biden said in his letter to the speaker of the House of Representatives and the president of the Senate.

The president said it would be the policy of his administration "that no more American taxpayer dollars be diverted to construct a border wall," adding that he had directed his team to conduct "a careful review" of all resources that have been redirected for that purpose.

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### UN Urges Actors With Influence in Ukraine to Lift Limits on Movement Along Contact Line

UNITED NATIONS, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United Nations called on all actors with influence in eastern Ukraine to facilitate freedom of movement across the contact line and secure the opening of additional crossing points to improve humanitarian access in the area, UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo told a UN Security Council meeting on Thursday.

"Humanitarian access remains a significant challenge for the UN and other international humanitarian actors operating across the contact line," DiCarlo said. "We urge all actors with influence to help lift undue restrictions on freedom of movement across the contact line and secure the opening of additional exit and entry crossing points."

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US Weekly Jobless Claims at 793,000 Last Week as COVID-19 Struggles Continue - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Some 793,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, Labor Department data showed Thursday, demonstrating the job market's continued difficulty in turning the corner from the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending February 6, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 793,000, a decrease of 19,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a news release.

The drop is smaller than the previous week's decline of 33,000 jobless claims. For the past four weeks, the number of claims has declined but narrowed in each of the past three weeks, showing the stranglehold the pandemic has on the jobs market.

"The claims and continuing claims were higher than expectations, but lower than the revised higher numbers last week," Greg Michalowski at ForexLive said in a commentary. "As expressed by Fed[er]al Reserve officials, employment is well off full employment levels."

On Wednesday, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said the United States was still very far from a strong jobs market due to the protracted coronavirus crisis.

Powell added that achieving maximum employment would require supportive monetary policy and contributions from across government and private sector. President Joe Biden, since taking office on January 20, has made the passing of a \$1.9 trillion relief package his top priority.

The Labor Department also said that continuing weekly claims - reported with a one-week lag but sometimes considered a better gauge of the labor market - slid to 4.55 million for the week ended February 6, from a previous 4.69 million. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, remained stagnant at 3.2 percent.

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Oldest US Bank BNY Mellon to Hold, Transfer, Issue Cryptocurrencies - CEO

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Bank of New York Mellon Corp, the oldest bank in the United States, has created a new unit to help its customers hold, transfer and issue cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin, the company announced on Thursday.

"BNY Mellon today announced the formation of a new enterprise Digital Assets unit that will accelerate the development of solutions and capabilities to help clients address growing and evolving needs related to the growth of digital assets, including cryptocurrencies," the bank said in a statement.

The decision to create the unit stems from growing client demand for digital assets and improved regulatory clarity, said Roman Regelman, chief executive of BNY Mellon's asset-servicing and digital businesses.

"Pending further evaluations and approvals, we expect to begin offering these innovative and industry-shaping capabilities later this year," Regelman said in the statement.

The Digital Assets team will be led by Mike Demissie, head of Advanced Solutions at BNY Mellon, the statement said.

BNY Mellon and other major custodian banks have in the past been reluctant to deal in cryptocurrencies due to potential regulatory or legal risks.

But the bank is only the latest in a growing number of major US firms to show support digital currencies. Earlier this month, Elon Musk said his electric car company Tesla had purchased \$1.5 billion worth of bitcoin and would soon allow customers to use the currency to buy its vehicles. The announcement helped drive bitcoin to record highs.

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e to convene for an inaugural session. The military declared a state of emergency for one year, pledging to hold a new election after it expires.

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