

02/12/21 Friday

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Lincoln Project Faces Exodus of Advisers Amid Sexual Harassment Coverup Scandal
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Donald Trump was a political outsider in the 2016 US presidential election, and many Republicans refused to accept him as one of their own, dubbing themselves "never-Trump" Republicans. When he sought re-election in 2020, the group rallied in support of his Democratic challenger, now the US president, Joe Biden.

An increasing number of senior figures in the never-Trump political action committee The Lincoln Project (TLP) have announced they are leaving, with three people saying Friday they were calling it quits in the wake of a sexual assault scandal involving co-founder John Weaver.

"I've always been transparent about all my affiliations, as I am now: I told TLP leadership yesterday that I'm stepping down as an unpaid adviser as they sort this out and decide their future direction and organization," Tom Nichols, a "never-Trump" Republican who supported the group's effort to rally conservative support for US President Joe Biden in the 2020 election, tweeted on Friday afternoon.

Nichols was joined by another adviser, [Kurt Bardella](#) and by [Nayyera Haq](#), who hosted the PAC's online show "The Lincoln Report."

Late on Friday, Lincoln Project co-founder Steve Schmidt [reportedly announced](#) his resignation following accusations from PAC employees that he handled the harassment scandal poorly, according to the Daily Beast.

Last month, [accusations by victims](#) of Weaver began to pour in, with nearly two dozen accusers saying he had sent them unsolicited sexual messages; some were as young as 14 at the time of the solicitations.

Weaver admitted to the acts and apologized for making the victims "uncomfortable," claiming he believed the sexual messages to be consensual. The Lincoln Project also issued a statement claiming ignorance and attempting to distance itself from Weaver, prompting [new accusations](#) that the group was well aware of Weaver's activities.

On Thursday, the [Associated Press published](#) a damning expose vindicating those coverup claims, citing TLP members with direct knowledge of a situation in June 2020 involving two other members of the PAC.

That same day, TLP published what appeared to be [confidential Twitter messages](#) between The 19th journalist, Amanda Becker, and Jennifer Horn, a co-founder of TLP who [quit last week](#) in disgust. Horn said she did not give the group permission to publish her private messages, and TLP deleted the tweets moments after George Conway, a lawyer and former TLP member, suggested the move was in [violation of federal law](#).

"We're not going to be bullied or intimidated out of pursuing critical journalism," Emily Ramshaw, a journalist and CEO of The 19th, [said in response](#) to the TLP tweet.

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DC Court Denies FOIA Documents, Ruling Trump Tweet Wasn't Admission CIA Funded Al-Qaeda in Syria
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Last fall, the US Department of Justice refused to declassify all documents related to the Russiagate investigation, saying a tweet by then-US President Donald Trump wasn't an official order to release unredacted files.

A DC Court of Appeals has sided with the US Central Intelligence Agency in claiming that just because former US President Donald Trump tweeted about something is not proof that it actually existed.

The case concerned a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request by Jason Leopold of BuzzFeed News for documents on CIA funding for anti-government rebels in Syria after Trump tweeted about ending the program.

"The Amazon Washington Post fabricated the facts on my ending massive, dangerous, and wasteful payments to Syrian rebels fighting Assad," [Trump tweeted on](#) July 24, 2017, as part of a rant about media bias.

The tweet formed the basis of Leopold's FOIA request for "payments to Syrian rebels fighting Assad," which the CIA refused to answer, saying that by giving an answer to his request it would be admitting to something that was illegal.

Loepold then sent a second request, this time seeking "agency records relating to payments to Syrian rebels," [according to a suit](#) filed in a DC federal court in 2019 seeking release of the documents. At first, the court came down on the reporter's side, but the intelligence agency appealed and a new trio of judges reversed the previous order.

"Because the president's tweet makes it implausible for any reasonable person to truly doubt the existence of at least some CIA records that are responsive to at least some of the nine categories of documents that Buzzfeed requested, Buzzfeed has managed to overcome the agency's Glomar response and the agency has failed to meet its burden in this case," the court ruled in 2019, referring to a type of inference of a document's existence based on the principle of "the dog that did not bark."

US District Judge Rudolph Contreras, who wrote the Circuit [Court's Thursday ruling](#), conceded that the tweet was an acknowledgement of "the government's intelligence interest in the broader categories of records that BuzzFeed has requested." He went on to ultimately undermine Leopold's argument, saying that "one would hope that the district court's assumption is accurate but who knows for sure? To establish official acknowledgment our precedents require certainty, not assumptions of this sort. The tweet here leaves too much doubt."

In other words, the CIA will not be required to admit to actions it is widely reported as having done, much less divulge documents about them to the press for even greater scrutiny.

Obama's Quest to Arm 'Moderate Rebels'

The New York Times, [which has admitted](#) that "national security officials" approve some of its stories prior to publication, has reported on the CIA's classified Timber Sycamore weapons and

training program for years. [In January 2016](#), the Times reported that then-US President Barack Obama had secretly authorized the CIA to “begin arming Syria’s embattled rebels in 2013.” “Under the deal, current and former administration officials said, the Saudis contribute both weapons and large sums of money, and the CIA takes the lead in training the rebels on AK-47 assault rifles and tank-destroying missiles,” the Times reported.

In a later August 2017 story, [the Times clarified](#) that the CIA was specifically afraid that armaments given to what the US State Department called “moderate rebels” had “ended up with Nusra Front fighters - and that some of the rebels joined the group.” The Al-Nusra Front at the time was the name of al-Qaeda’s franchise in Syria; the militia has since joined Hay’at Tahrir ash-Sham, which claims to be a new organization and not affiliated with al-Qaeda, even though it reportedly upholds an identical Wahabbist doctrine.

Trump has said more on the issue than just off-hand tweets. In an interview with the [Wall Street Journal](#) in July 2017, Trump spoke plainly about CIA funding for Syrian rebels, saying, “It turns out it’s – a lot of al-Qaeda we’re giving these weapons to. You know, they didn’t write the truthful story, which they never do.”

Trump was referring to a [Washington Post story](#) about which his tweet cited by Leopold had raged, which framed termination of the CIA program as a “major concession” to Russia, which supports the Syrian government in the civil war.

“We are falling into a Russian trap,” Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute and longtime advocate of arming Syrian rebels, told the Post. “We are making the moderate resistance more and more vulnerable. . . . We are really cutting them off at the neck.”

Another, far more public program run by the Pentagon also aimed to train “moderate rebels” totally separate from the CIA program. That effort turned out to be a [\\$500 million disaster](#) that only yielded a handful of fighters who notoriously retreated at the first sign of battle.

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US CDC’s New Safety Guidelines Prioritize School Reopening Over Other Community Institutions

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a member of the White House COVID-19 task force, said earlier this week that vaccination for the general public could be available by April, with the entire US population getting the shots by the end of the summer.

New guidelines on school reopening issued by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Friday prioritize a return to in-person learning above nearly all other social and civic functions.

The [updated document](#) is part of US President Joe Biden’s pledge to return the majority of elementary and middle schools to in-person learning in his first 100 days in office and outlines the safety measures necessary to mitigate COVID-19 spread, which it says is proven to be lower among young children than teenagers or adults.

“K–12 schools should be the last settings to close after all other mitigation measures in the community have been employed, and the first to reopen when they can do so safely,” the CDC wrote. “Schools should be prioritized for reopening and remaining open for in-person instruction over nonessential businesses and activities.”

According to the document, this can be accomplished by shedding extracurricular activities and maintaining safety measures, such as universal mask-wearing and social distancing of six feet between persons. It also recommends that students are placed in groups called “cohorts” or “pods” while at school, to minimize their exposure to a wide group of people. However, vaccination “should not be considered a condition” of reopening, it says.

The document also notes that research suggests that children younger than high school age - 13 or 14 years old and younger - are less likely to catch or spread COVID-19 and are also the ones most likely to suffer from at-home learning. It advises that remote learning be reserved for high schoolers, but makes no firm recommendations, noting that each district must decide its own course based on the extent of community spread of COVID-19.

Families with people to whom potential exposure to COVID-19 would pose an extreme risk should be given the option of remote learning regardless of what the rest of the school district is doing, the CDC further advised.

However, some of the guidelines remain vague, including on one of the most politically contentious subjects: ventilation.

“Improve ventilation to the extent possible such as by opening windows and doors to increase circulation of outdoor air to increase the delivery of clean air and dilute potential contaminants,” it says. “Opening windows and doors should be consistent with school safety protocols and safety plans. Do not open windows and doors if doing so poses a safety risk or a health risk (e.g., risk of falling, triggering asthma symptoms) to anyone using the facility. Opening windows and doors should be consistent with school safety protocols and safety plans.”

As [Sputnik has reported](#), many teachers across the US have gone on strike against being forced back into in-person teaching in schools with inadequate ventilation, including a lack of updated filters, ducts, and air pumps. One of the [CDC’s own studies](#) published last month showed that in schools where air is simply recycled instead of replaced, it increases COVID-19 spread.

For many places in the US, opening windows or doors is simply not possible due to weather extremes: at present, a “polar vortex” has [pushed frigid air](#) from Siberia down across much of the country, plunging temperatures in Chicago down to just 18 degrees Fahrenheit on Friday and a forecast to fall below zero in the coming days. As far south as Houston, Texas, temperatures rose to just 39 degrees Fahrenheit on Friday, and an icy low of 13 is predicted on Monday.

CDC Director Rochelle Walensky [told reporters Friday](#) the agency’s operational strategy is “grounded in science and the best available evidence.”

Last summer, the CDC did an about-face on its previously-stringent school safety advice [under intense political pressure](#) from the Trump administration, which said it wanted to quickly return tens of millions of [parents to work](#) by sending their children back to school in the fall 2020 semester. Internal administration emails [obtained by Politico](#) in December 2020 revealed how the CDC was strongarmed into emulating guidelines issued by the Trump-appointed and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and changing the title of a September report on COVID-19

spread and mortality among children and youth in order to conceal its content amid the push to reopen.

Thanks to renewed social lockdowns in communities across the US, the colossal spike in COVID-19 cases that began in November 2020 has begun to fall, although on Friday the seven-day moving average for daily new cases was still 100,937, [according to CDC](#) data. However, the death rate remains high: in all, 473,699 Americans have died from the virus, with 3,589 dying just on Thursday.

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Pakistan Hosts 45 Navies for Joint Drills, Including Russia, China, NATO Members
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The last time Russian naval forces drilled with their counterparts in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was 10 years ago off the coast of Spain, during the “Bold Monarch” exercises. While relations between NATO nations and Russia and China have become increasingly standoffish, sailors from their respective navies have gotten the chance to cooperate in joint exercises hosted by Pakistan this week.

The AMAN-21 [peace-21] exercise, held in Karachi and the Arabian Sea this week, is the first time Russian and NATO warships have drilled together since 2010, and [is the first time](#) US and Chinese forces have cooperated since US President Joe Biden took office last month. Rear Adm. Naveed Ashraf, commander of the Pakistani fleet, [said on Monday](#) the drills are “about bridging gaps and making it possible to operate together in pursuance of common objectives.” A major component is also joint anti-piracy patrols, which several nations run the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean.

Some Chinese ships taking part include a Type 052D guided missile destroyer, the Guiyang, a Type 054A guided missile frigate, the Zaozhuang, and a Type 903A comprehensive supplement ship, the Dongpingh. From Russia, a Project 22160 patrol ship, the Dmitry Rogachev, and a first-in-class frigate, the Admiral Grigorovich, took part, as well as a tug.

According to [the Global Times](#), the exercises have two parts: one onshore, consisting of the International Maritime Conference and seminars, visits to ships of other navies and demonstrations in maritime counter-terrorism. The other is at sea, during which the navies put into practice activities they have learned and discussed while ashore.

Some of the other nations present included the United Kingdom, Bangladesh, Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, and unnamed nations from East Africa, [according to Dawn](#). Iran’s general staff sent a delegation as well, [according to IRNA](#).

Talat Masood, a retired Pakistani general-turned security analyst, told [Turkey’s Anadolu Agency](#) that bringing together nearly four dozen nations, “including rivals, is noteworthy” of Lahore “The exercise will also serve as a diplomatic push for Islamabad,” he added. “Pakistan has shown that it has expanded its diplomatic clout to the point where it can bring together the countries that otherwise are hostile to each other.”

Pakistan has proven to be a ready customer for many nations, purchasing weapons for its military from Russia, China, the US, and France, among others.

The event comes amid a continuing and significant US naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, where US carrier strike groups have been stationed nonstop for years, as part of Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. Both Tehran and the new administration in Washington have indicated their willingness to defuse tensions by returning to the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal, but each power has insisted the other return to compliance first. Just days ago, Biden announced the creation of a new [Pentagon task force](#) on China, which he said would help the administration to "meet the China challenge and ensure the American people win the competition in the future." The US Navy recently hosted [dual-carrier drills](#) in the South China Sea, in which Washington and other regional governments are challenging Chinese territorial claims, and sailed warships through the [Taiwan Strait](#), which Beijing continues to claim are internal waters belonging to mainland China.

During a [Wednesday phone call](#) between Biden and the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, the latter stressed the need for cooperation as Biden levied charges of human rights violations and economic malfeasance against Xi's government.

"Sino-American cooperation is in many ways beneficial both for the United States and China and for the entire world," Xi said to Biden, according to China Central Television. "A confrontation between China and the United States is absolutely a disaster for the two countries and for the entire world."

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YouTube Continues to Push 'White Supremacist' Videos, Study Claims
by [Mary F.](#)

YouTube has previously been criticized for allowing extremist videos, including 'white supremacist' content, to exist on its platform. In the past, the platform has attempted to remove videos, containing extremist content.

A new [report](#) by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which aims to stop the defamation of Jews and non-Jews alike, advocating fair treatment for all, has revealed that even though YouTube has removed thousands of extremist videos, there still remains "white supremacist" content that circulates among subsets of users.

According to the study, which evaluated the viewing habits of 915 people, one in every 10 participants viewed at least one video from an extremist channel and two in 10 viewed a video from an "alternative" channel. Alternative channels are ones that "serve as gateways to more extreme forms of content," the ADL reports in its study.

The study also found that YouTube's recommendation algorithm showed extremist content to those who had viewed similar content previously.

"Participants often received and sometimes followed recommendations for videos from alternative and extremist channels, especially on videos from those channels," the study found.

For example, users who viewed extremist content on YouTube were recommended other similar videos to watch almost 30% of the time. In addition, almost all of the 9% of users who watch a video from extremist channels also viewed videos on alternative channels as well.

The report also found identified 322 “alternative” channels and 290 “extremist or white supremacist” channels on YouTube. Among both alternative and extremist channels, 515 were still active as of the end of January.

“Despite the recent changes that YouTube has made, our findings indicate that far too many people are still being exposed to extremist ideas on the platform,” Brendan Nyhan, an author on the report and professor of government at Dartmouth College, said in a statement.

In a separate statement, YouTube defended how it has dealt with extremist content.

“We have clear policies that prohibit hate speech and harassment on YouTube, and terminated over 235,000 channels in the last quarter for violating those policies,” the company said in a statement, [the Hill reported](#).

“Beyond removing content, since 2019 we’ve also limited the reach of content that does not violate our policies but brushes up against the line, by making sure our systems are not widely recommending it to those not seeking it. We welcome more research on this front, but views this type of content gets from recommendations has dropped by over 70% in the US, and as other researchers have noted, our systems often point to authoritative content,” the company added. ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt noted, however, that YouTube has not done enough to prevent the dissemination of extremist content.

“It is far too easy for individuals interested in extremist content to find what they are looking for on YouTube over and over again,” Greenblatt said in a statement obtained by the Hill. “Tech platforms including YouTube must take further action to ensure that extremist content is scrubbed from their platforms, and if they do not, then they should be held accountable when their systems, built to engage users, actually amplify dangerous content that leads to violence,” he added.

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Videos: Texas Ice Storm Leads to Widespread Power Outages, Fatal Car Crashes
by [Mary F.](#)

A winter storm brought freezing rain and snow to a wide swath of the US, from Texas to the mid-Atlantic, resulting in hazardous travel conditions, fatal car accidents, extensive tree damage and widespread power outages. Hazardous weather conditions are expected to continue through next week.

More than 34,000 residents were without power on Friday morning, according to [poweroutage.us](#), as an ice storm in Texas caused by a polar vortex cycling southward from Canada, swept across the region. Tens of thousands in Kentucky and West Virginia have lost power as well, according to [poweroutage.us](#).

The storm, named Shirley by The Weather Channel, led to several fatal multi-car pileups in Ft. Worth and Austin, Texas, Thursday morning, [weather.com](#) reported. At least six people have been killed in car accidents.

"The scene we saw today is really one unlike probably any of us have ever seen and we pray to god we never see again," Fort Worth Police Chief Neil Noakes said in a press conference late Thursday afternoon, [weather.com reported](#).

"It appears at this point in the investigation, which is still very preliminary, that ice was a factor," he added.

On Friday, Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration in 254 counties in response to severe weather conditions.

"Texas should heed the guidance of their local leaders and stay alert to changing weather conditions in their area," Abbott said, [ABC reported](#).

"These resources will help us respond to this severe winter weather and keep our communities safe. The State of Texas remains in close contact with officials on the ground and will provide any additional resources and support that are needed," he added.

Tree damage has also been reported in Elliot and Hardin counties in Kentucky, with Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear announcing a state of emergency on Thursday in response to the winter storm.

"This winter storm already is causing some very dangerous conditions across much of the state, with iced-over roadways and downed power lines putting our people at risk. This declaration will free up funding and boost coordination across agencies as we respond to this weather crisis and work to keep all Kentuckians safe," Beshear said, [LEX18 reported](#).

Meanwhile, flights at Memphis International Airport in Tennessee have been delayed while Indiana schools and government offices shut down in response to the storm.

Freezing rain and snow are forecast to continue across the central US over the weekend, the [National Weather Service](#) (NWS) reported Friday.

"In fact, much of the central US from the Dakotas to Texas could witness many broken daily record low max temperatures through the upcoming weekend," the agency noted.

"The expansive dome of sub-freezing temperatures across the northern tier of the country has laid the foundation for winter storms to wreak havoc from coast-to-coast not only going into this weekend, but also into next week," the NWS added.

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Video: China Releases Footage of Tianwen-1 Probe Entering Red Planet's Orbit

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

China's Tianwen-1 spacecraft was launched toward Mars in July 2020 from the Wenchang Space Launch Center, and successfully entered the red planet's orbit on Wednesday. The 5-ton probe isn't expected to land on the Martian surface until sometime in May.

The China National Space Administration released video footage on Friday that captured Tianwen-1's very first encounter with Mars, marking a significant milestone for Beijing's growing space missions.

Published by state broadcaster CCTV, the video recording documents Mars' surface throughout the course of an entire Martian day, showing the planet's rocky terrain fading from white to black.

Multiple craters and the planet's thin atmosphere can also be seen in video captured by the space probe moments after entering Mars' orbit on Wednesday. Officials noted in [a release](#) that a "slight vibration" seen in the video was caused by the craft's engine being ignited.

Also visible in the camera's scope is the probe's solar wing and directional antenna, according to the agency, which indicated the video release was part of China's bid to welcome the Lunar New Year.

The release of the video recording came a few days after the Chinese space agency published a black-and-white photo of Mars as a means to confirm the probe had indeed entered the Martian orbit.

The agency [previously indicated](#) the image was snapped at a distance of 2.2 million kilometres from Mars, highlighting the photo was a view of the Mars Asidalia Plain, the Cluse Plain and the Zi Meridian Plateau, among other landforms.

China's Tianwen-1 spacecraft, launched aboard a Long March 5 Y-4 carrier rocket, carries with it an orbiter, a lander and a 530-pound rover that will explore the Utopia Planitia basin.

Following its May touchdown on the Martian surface, the probe will begin a three-month study of the planet's soil and atmosphere while searching for signs of alien life.

Tianwen-1 won't be alone on the red planet, as the spacecraft will be joined by the United Arab Emirates' [Al-Amal probe](#) and the US' [Perseverance rover](#), scheduled to arrive on February 18, if all goes according to plan.

Tianwen-1's success places the Chinese space program one step closer to the country's aim to establish its own space station by 2022, as well as eventually putting an astronaut back on the moon.

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Hubble Telescope Helps Unearth Bevy of Small Black Holes Inside Globular Cluster
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Located some 7,800 light-years away in the Ara constellation, NGC 6397 is considered one of the two globular clusters closest to Earth. As a result of its dense nucleus, it is also known as a core-collapsed cluster.

[New findings](#) by a pair of researchers with France's Paris Institute of Astrophysics have determined that a concentration of stellar-mass black holes is situated inside of globular cluster NGC 6397.

A globular cluster is defined as an overly dense stellar system that has host stars packed extremely close to one another, and more often than not, they are very old systems. In regards to NGC 6397, it's believed some 400,000 stars make up the system which officials estimate is as old as the universe.

Researchers Eduardo Vitral and Gary Mamon initially focused their attention on NGC 6397 with the intention of investigating whether the cluster hosted an intermediate-mass black hole (IMBH) - a highly-debated matter among astronomers eager to find a link between supermassive black holes and stellar-mass black holes.

However, upon further investigation, they instead discovered that the cluster was actually filled with many small black holes. Vitral and Mamon were able to make the discovery by tapping on observations made by NASA's Hubble Space Telescope and measurements provided by the European Space Agency's Gaia space observatory.

In their search for intermediate-mass black holes, both researchers analyzed the positions and velocities of the cluster's stars, but soon uncovered an invisible component that prompted researchers to conclude that NGC 6397 was riddled with small black holes - not the IMBH they had hoped to find.

Officials argued in their findings that the mystery component they came upon could only be the remnants of massive stars such as white dwarfs or neutron stars based on their mass, extent and location. They further noted that the majority of the black holes were located within the center of the NGC 6397 as a result of gravitational drag, which prompts dead stars to sink toward the galactic center, as lower-mass stars migrate outward.

"Our analysis indicated that the orbits of the stars are close to random throughout the globular cluster, rather than systematically circular or very elongated," Mamon explained in [a NASA statement](#). "We used the theory of stellar evolution to conclude that most of the extra mass we found was in the form of black holes."

Vitral and Mamon's findings come as two recent studies have proposed that stellar-mass black holes could populate the core of globular clusters. The pair have postulated that their findings could support the argument that black holes within globular clusters are a source of gravitational waves.

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Former US Olympian Klete Keller Indicted on Additional Charges Over Capitol Riot
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Two-time Olympic gold medalist Klete Keller was earlier hit with three criminal charges over his participation in the deadly January 6 Capitol riot, after the champion swimmer was identified on video, wearing his US Olympic Team jacket.

A grand jury has returned a new indictment against Keller on Wednesday, hitting the athlete with several additional charges over his involvement in the violent storming of the US Capitol by Trump supporters which saw five killed.

The latest [court filing](#) indicates the new indictment charges Keller with seven criminal offenses, including civil disorder, obstruction of an official proceeding, entering and remaining in a restricted building or grounds and disorderly and disruptive conduct in a restricted building or grounds, among other violations.

U.S. Olympic swimmer Klete Keller appears in this courtroom sketch during a virtual hearing before Magistrate Judge G. Michael Harvey in a District of Columbia court January 22, 2021 on charges related to the January 6th storming of the U.S. Capitol in Washington.

Keller was [previously charged by federal authorities](#) in January with obstructing law enforcement, violent entry and disorderly conduct, as well as entering a restricted building. According to the [Washington Post](#), prosecutors involved in the case later asked a grand jury to consider whether or not Keller's actions were deserving of more serious charges, a request that has been made in "many" cases related to the Capitol riot.

Keller was taken into custody by federal authorities last month after he was identified on video footage captured by Townhall reporter Julio Rosas. Keller was first reported to have been involved with the Capitol attack by SwimSwam, a news outlet that covers competitive swimming. The former Olympian, who participated in the 2000, 2004 and 2008 Games, has been released from custody on a personal recognizance bond. He has since returned to his home in Colorado Springs, Colorado, after being ordered to stay away from Washington DC, unless for court appearances.

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Video: Massive Fire Erupts at 'Hole in the Wall Gang Camp' in Connecticut Founded by Late US Actor
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp was established in 1988 by the late American actor Paul Newman with the intention that the grounds would provide "a different kind of healing" to seriously ill children and their loved ones.

Emergency personnel from nearby towns responded to reports of a massive fire at the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in Ashford, Connecticut, on Friday, after details surfaced that multiple buildings at the facility were engulfed in flames.

Footage captured from the scene shows much of the facilities ablaze, with heavy smoke billowing as officials attempt to control the incident.

Local news outlet [WTNH reported](#) that firefighters have been able to contain the fire to a "controlled measure," but that it's still unclear what caused the blaze to break out.

No injuries or fatalities have been reported.

Firefighters reportedly responded to the scene at about 5 p.m. local time, with emergency responders from "multiple area towns" helping to put out the blaze, according to the [Hartford Courant](#).

James Canton, CEO of the camp, explained in a statement to WTNH that the Arts & Crafts, Woodshop, Cooking Zone and Camp Store buildings were destroyed in the fire.

"We deeply appreciate the quick response of the local fire departments and Connecticut State Police Troop C," reads the statement. "Although the cause of the fire is unknown at this time, what is known is that The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp is a community devoted to hope and healing. We will get through this in the way that we always have and always will – as a family."

According to the camp's website, the facility was founded by the "The Sting" actor to "give every child - no matter their illness - the chance to 'raise a little hell.'" The year-round programs associated with the facility serve more than 20,000 children dealing with an illness.

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Biden Administration Launches Formal Review of Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Guantanamo Bay, or 'Gitmo', detention camp, was established under former US President George W. Bush's administration following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. Almost 800 individuals have at times been detained in the facility, which now holds an estimated 40 prisoners only.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki announced during a Friday news conference that the US National Security Council (NSC) has launched a formal review of the prison at the US' Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

"We are undertaking an NSC process ... to assess the current state of play that the Biden administration, we have inherited from the previous administration," Psaki told reporters. The press secretary revealed that closing the military prison is the "goal and intention" of the administration's review.

However, the process of closing cannot start in earnest until the confirmation of "sub-Cabinet policy roles at the Defense, State, and Justice Departments," Psaki noted.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin told lawmakers last month that he supports US President Joe Biden's push to close the detention center and would be open to assisting with the administration's "path forward."

"I believe it is time for the detention facility at Guantanamo to close its doors," [he said](#) in written testimony for his Senate confirmation hearing.

The Pentagon press secretary, John F. Kirby, reiterated Austin's support on Friday.

The Biden administration's push to close the military prison comes as a continuation of former US President Barack Obama's efforts to do the same.

While Obama signed a 2010 [executive order](#) mandating that the facility be shuttered in a year's time, lawmakers from both sides of the aisle passed a set of bills prohibiting the transfer of prisoners into the US. Many argued that detainees released or transferred would revert back to terrorism.

"Of the nearly 800 detainees once held at Guantanamo, more than 85 percent have already been transferred to other countries," [Obama claimed](#) in 2016. "More than 500 of these transfers, by the way, occurred under President Bush. Since I took office, we've so far transferred 147 more, each under new, significant restrictions to keep them from returning to the battlefield." Former US President Donald Trump, who [argued](#) that it was "crazy" for the US to annually spend \$13 million per Guantanamo inmate, blasted Obama's attempts to close the facility that were in fact stymied by a Republican-controlled Congress.

"We're looking at a lot of things," Trump claimed in 2019. "Look, President Obama said that Guantánamo Bay would be closed, and he never got it done."

The Trump administration transferred just one inmate, Ahmed Muhammed [Haza al-Darbi](#), during his presidency.

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US Lawmakers Urge Biden Administration to Enforce Sanctions to Impede Nord Stream 2 Construction

by [Evan Craighead](#)

The push to enforce Nord Stream 2 sanctions comes weeks after the European Parliament voted 581-50-44 in favor of passing a resolution demanding that the construction of the \$11 billion Baltic Sea pipeline, which is approximately 90% complete, be stopped immediately. Sens. Jim Risch (R-WI) and Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) issued a memo to US President Joe Biden on Friday, urging the latter to fully implement the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act ([PEESA](#)), which accuses Russia of using its "energy export pipelines to create national and regional dependencies on Russian energy supplies."

"Press reports that the German government has put forth an offer that would require the United States to disregard statutorily-mandated sanctions have us concerned," [wrote Risch](#), a ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Shaheen, the chair of the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation.

The memo claims that the pipeline, which runs from Russia to Germany, will be a "potent new geopolitical tool for Russia, allowing it to deprive Ukraine, Slovakia, and other nations of transit fees."

"It would tie Western Europe to Russian gas, and the political coercion that accompanies it, for the next 40 years," the memo alleged, labeling the natural gas pipeline as a "dangerous project."

A US State Department spokesperson told [NBC News](#) on Friday that the Biden administration "will monitor activity to complete or certify the pipeline and, if such activity takes place, make a determination on the applicability of sanctions."

The spokesperson emphasized that the US would continue to work with allies "to ensure Europe has a reliable, diversified energy supply network that does not undermine our collective security."

While Biden has claimed the pipeline to be a "bad deal for Europe," German Environment Minister Svenja Schulze insisted earlier this week that Germany will continue to rely on gas "until about 2040."

"We are all unanimous that we want to end the use of coal and nuclear energy, we will write off nuclear power plants," [she said](#) Wednesday. "This means that for the transition period we will need gas."

The US lawmakers' letter to Biden comes amid calls for the European Union to level new sanctions against Moscow and companies involved with the natural gas pipeline.

"The EU should understand that even if sanctions cost Russia a lot, they are impacting also European economies," Andrea Picchielli, a member of Italy's Lega party, [told Sputnik](#) Friday. "Europe-Russia trade has declined already in the last years, and in this moment of a big economic crisis due to the coronavirus pandemic, imposing new sanctions is really nonsense." Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that anti-Russian sanctions by the EU will not only have a negative impact on Russia, but also on European economies.

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Voters Jolted by Trump Trial Likely to Punish Republicans if Senate Acquits - Prosecutor

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - Voters disturbed by the evidence presented at Donald Trump's impeachment trial are likely to punish Republicans at the polls in the next election if they acquit the former president again, US Assistant State Attorney in Florida's 17th Judicial District, David Cannady, told Sputnik.

On Friday, Trump's defense team presented their case, arguing that the Democrats failed to prove their client incited an insurrection at the Capitol on January 6. The Senate will convene on Saturday to vote on a final verdict, with many doubting they will reach the two-thirds majority needed to convict the former president. The Senate is evenly split along partisan lines, hence it will take 17 Republicans to break ranks to reach the minimum 67 votes.

"The impeachment process is... a wake-up call which is a necessity right now," Cannady said. "Senators who're ignoring the evidence and plan to support Trump [will] be punished through the electoral process."

Democratic Impeachment managers unveiled new security footage and police radio transmissions depicting the violence of the US Capitol assault. The presentation showed some lawmakers were minutes and a few feet from encountering a pro-Trump mob who vowed to kill lawmakers for allegedly stealing the 2020 election.

Trump was acquitted last February by the Republican-controlled Senate over charges of pressuring Kiev to probe Joe Biden and his family. If Trump is acquitted again, many expect he will run in 2024, which is why Senate Democrats are pushing to vote to ban Trump from running for any office ever again.

Cannady, who has been an assistant state attorney for six years, warned that another acquittal will set a dangerous precedent and future presidents will not be deterred from abusing power. Moreover, an acquittal will allow Trump to continue abusing power and controlling the Republican Party.

"We have to look at this through the lens of history and the long-term view. If not, the January exception will become the norm," he said.

Cannady, who ran for Broward County State Attorney in 2020, said the trial is important given the sustained attacks by Trump against American institutions. Trump is symptomatic of a broken system which fundamentally needs to be reformed, he added.

"It shows that once you get a taste of that power, it's hard to give it back," he said. "If you sit in the chair next to the most powerful people in the world and you're able to influence and move people, you want to maintain that power."

Cannady compared Trump's reaction to that of President Richard Nixon, who stepped down before being impeached in the 1970s over the Watergate scandal.

"Nixon stepped down to avoid prosecution - but Trump continues to step forward and do what he can to maintain that power," Cannady concluded.

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US Cancels Oil, Gas Lease Sale Affecting 78Mln Acres in Gulf of Mexico - Interior Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has canceled an oil and gas lease sale of more than 78 million acres in the Gulf of Mexico, the US Interior Department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management said in a press release.

"The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) today announced that it is rescinding the Record of Decision (ROD) for the Gulf of Mexico (GOM) Oil and Gas Lease Sale 257," the release said on Friday. "The decision pauses planning for the proposed sale, which was expected to occur this March."

Lease sale 257 was scheduled to take place on March 17 and would have auctioned off more than 78 million acres in the Gulf of Mexico.

The lease sale was canceled as a result of President Joe Biden's executive order directing the Secretary of the Interior to pause new oil and gas leasing on federal lands and offshore waters pending a review of federal leasing activities.

The Trump administration held eight offshore leases that opened up 517 million acres for oil and gas exploration. Of the 517 million acres, only 4.6 million acres were leased to the oil and gas industry, mostly in the Gulf of Mexico.

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US Senate Completes Q&A in Trump's Impeachment Trial, Adjourn Until Saturday

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The US Senate completed a questions and answers session in the Donald Trump impeachment trial and adjourned until Saturday when it is expected to vote on whether the former president is guilty of the incitement to insurrection.

Once both sides wrapped up their presentations on Friday, senators for around three hours interviewed House managers, who act as prosecutors, and the former president's lawyers.

The Senate will reconvene on Saturday at 10.00 a.m. EST (3:00 p.m. GMT). According to CNN, a final vote on Trump's conviction or acquittal is expected around 3:00 p.m. EST.

The verdict is likely to be in favor of the former president given an apparent lack of a two-thirds majority needed for conviction over his alleged role in the January 6 attack on the Capitol.

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US Continues to Seek Extradition of WikiLeaks' Julian Assange - Justice Dept .

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department is continuing efforts to seek the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States, spokesperson Nicole Navas told Sputnik.

"I can confirm we are continuing our efforts to seek the extradition of Julian Assange," Navas said on Friday when asked if the Justice Department appealed a British judge's ruling against extraditing Assange.

In January, UK district judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled not to extradite Assange to the United States, citing health reasons and the risk of suicide in the US prison system, but did not release him from the Belmarsh high-security prison where he remains in detention.

Assange was initially convicted by the Obama administration for conspiring to hack classified information on a government computer. In 2019, charges were expanded to include espionage, punishable by a total of 175 years in prison. Assange is believed to be responsible for the largest leak of classified information in history on WikiLeaks in 2010 that shed light on war crimes committed by US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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CDC Says US Schools Can Safely Reopen as White House Mulls Over Plan

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - US schools can be reopened safely for in-person learning amid the coronavirus pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in federal guidelines issued Friday that the White House declined to immediately endorse.

"Data suggest that it is possible for communities to bring down cases of COVID-19 while keeping schools open to in-person instruction," the CDC said. "Schools should be prioritized for reopening and remaining open for in-person instruction over nonessential businesses and activities."

The reopening of schools amid the protracted pandemic has been a hot-button issue in the United States, with both Democrats in power and their Republican rivals in Congress accusing each other of politicizing the matter.

Republicans have argued for months that all the 50 states in the country should reopen their schools as children were proven to be least vulnerable to the virus. Democrats, led by current president Joe Biden, say the risk is greater for teachers and others exposed to children who were potentially asymptomatic carriers of the virus.

The Biden administration said earlier on Friday that it had yet to review the CDC plan to ascertain its workability.

"We trust the scientists and we certainly trust the guidelines of the CDC. We've long said that but we haven't reviewed them yet," White House Press Secretary Jan Psaki said at her daily media briefing when asked about the matter. "So it's hard for me to do this (endorsement) in a piecemeal way. But we certainly believe they will be an important step to moving the process forward."

The CDC said as a broad guide, US elementary to high schools, popularly known as "K to 12" schools, should be safe to reopen.

The CDC noted that evidence showed coronavirus introduction and transmission risk among elementary school-aged children was lower than that of middle- and high school students.

"As a result, evidence suggests a need to adjust mitigation strategies based on higher susceptibility and infectiousness among teens compared to younger children," the CDC said. Reopening should also be guided by information on school-specific factors such as mitigation strategies implemented, local needs, stakeholder input, the number of infections among students, teachers and staff, as well as school experience with safely reopening, the CDC added.

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American Charged for Killing Mom Who Worked for Pentagon in Bahrain - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - A US citizen has been charged for allegedly killing his mother who worked as a Defense Department employee in Bahrain, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"Giovanni Pope, 27, was charged with murder by way of criminal complaint in the District of Maryland Tuesday," the release said on Friday. "US military authorities in Bahrain arrested Pope and his initial appearance was held via video teleconference, at which time he was ordered detained and removed to the United States pursuant to the Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act."

Pope allegedly stabbed his mother to death in Bahrain on January 31, the release said.

Pope had attempted to dispose evidence of the crime and purchased a plane ticket to return to the United States hours after the incident happened, however, he was apprehended by US military authorities in Bahrain, the release added.

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Air Canada CEO Says Finally 'Encouraged' By Airline Industry Bailout Talks With Government

TORONTO, February 12 (Sputnik) - Air Canada CEO Calin Rovinescu said he is finally seeing encouraging signs emanating from discussions with the federal government concerning a bailout package for an industry decimated by the coronavirus pandemic.

"I am also very encouraged by the constructive nature of discussions that we have had with the Government of Canada on sector-specific financial support over the last several weeks. While there is no assurance at this stage that we will arrive at a definitive agreement on sector support, I am more optimistic on this front for the first time," Rovinescu said in a press release on Friday announcing the company's 2020 financial results.

The Canadian government has mused about a possible boost for the laboring industry since the onset of the pandemic last spring but no concrete announcements have been made.

The company is also hoping for relaxed quarantine requirements sometime in the first half of the year, the company said, citing the preliminary results of a study looking into the effectiveness of travel testing regimes. The study, conducted by McMaster Health Labs and the University of Toronto, is expected to be published in the first quarter of 2021.

However, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam cautioned against making bold assumptions, saying "it's probably premature right now to know what is happening at the end of April."

Canada's flagship airliner reported an operating loss of \$2.97 billion in 2020, with revenues declining by 70 percent - \$10.47 billion - year-over-year.

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UK Lawyer Karim Khan Elected as Next International Criminal Court Prosecutor

UNITED NATIONS, February 12 (Sputnik) - States who are parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) elected UK lawyer Karim Khan to serve as the ICC's next prosecutor for a nine-year term.

Earlier on Friday, Khan won a secret ballot against three other candidates from Ireland, Italy and Spain. To win the election, a candidate must receive 62 votes out of the total of 123.

At the start of his term on June 16, Khan will replace current ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda. Khan currently serves as the UN Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and leads the UN team to probe alleged war crimes committed by the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia).

Khan had worked on several high-profile cases in the past, including at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

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American Charged for Killing Mom Who Worked for Pentagon in Bahrain - US Justice Dept.

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Trump Lawyers Conclude Presentation at US Senate Impeachment Trial

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - Donald Trump's lawyers wrapped up the presentation of arguments to acquit the former US President in the impeachment trial paving the way for the Senate to debate and vote.

The defense team took about three hours to present the case out of the allotted 16 hours and criticized the US House managers for their failure to prove the connection between Trump and the January 6 incident at the Capitol.

"The House managers knowing it was not contested at all chose to spend 14-plus hours showing you pictures of how horrific the attack on the US Capitol was. They spent no time at all on connecting legally the attack on the Capitol to the 45th President of the United States, which is the only question that needs to be answered," Trump's top lawyer Bruce Castor Jr. said in the closing remarks on Friday.

Castor sought to prove that President Trump's speech on January could not have incited unrest at the Capitol as the unrest began while he was giving a speech, in which he called on supporters to protest "peacefully and patriotically," and noted that the former president's words have been distorted to show otherwise.

"At 11.15 am police security camera videos show crowds forming at 1st Street near the Capitol Reflecting pool. This is a full 45 minutes before President Trump even took the stage on January 6," Castor said. "Violent criminals were assembling at the Capitol over a mile away almost an hour before the President uttered a single word on the Ellipse. You didn't hear that fact during the hours and hours of the House managers presentation, did you?"

Castor said Trump's controversial appeal to "fight like Hell" was similarly taken literally when it referred to using electoral leverage on Congress.

"What the President said was, 'If you can't get through members of Congress to do what you would like them to do, you primary them.' That's the American way," Castor said. "President Trump said, 'Peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard.' And House managers took from that, 'Go down to the Capitol and riot.'"

Castor characterized the impeachment as an attempt by Democrats to silence free speech and criminalize the views of their political opponents.

"It's about silencing and banning the speech the majority does not agree with. It's about cancelling 75 million Trump voters and criminalizing political view points. It's the only existential issue before us. It asks for constitutional cancel culture to take over in the US Senate," Castor said.

In the subsequent question and answer period, which may last up to four hours, senators have the opportunity to asking Trump's lawyers and the US House impeachment managers questions about the case. The verdict may be passed as early as this weekend and is very likely to be in favor of former President Trump.

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Biden Press Official Temporarily Suspended After Threat to Destroy Reporter - White House

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The White House has suspended Deputy Press Secretary T.J. Ducklo for a week without pay after he threatened to "destroy" a female reporter for investigating aspects of his private life, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a statement.

"With the approval of the White House Chief of Staff, [Ducklo] has been placed on a one-week suspension without pay," Psaki said on Friday. "In addition, when he returns, he will no longer be assigned to work with any reporters at Politico. He is the first to acknowledge this is not the standard of behavior set out by the president."

People magazine earlier reported that Ducklo was dating Axios political reporter Alexi McCammond, who covered President Joe Biden's election campaign. As the story emerged, Ducklo threatened Politico reporter Tara Palmeri, who was investigating the story, and threatened to destroy her. His threat was then reported by Vanity Fair magazine. Psaki said Ducklo sent Palmieri a personal note apologizing for his behavior.

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Nearly 60% of Canadians Say Government Vaccination Regime 'Failure' - Poll

TORONTO, February 12 (Sputnik) - Nearly 60 percent of Canadians condemned the Trudeau government's COVID-19 vaccination program as a failure, an Angus Reid Institute poll revealed. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and members of his cabinet have received the brunt of criticism for the country's vaccine shortage that has seen Canada surpassed by numerous other countries.

"Two-in-five (41 percent) say that there's not much Canada could have done, while a majority (59 percent) point to a failure of planning," the poll said on Friday.

The findings also shed light on increasing skepticism among Canadians and their trust in the government's ability to deliver on vaccination promises. Trudeau has repeatedly pledged that

any Canadian who wishes to be vaccinated will have the opportunity to do so, however, only 37 percent expressed confidence in this claim.

Additionally, only 43 percent of Canadians expressed confidence in the federal government's ability to effectively manage the distribution of vaccines, according to the poll results.

Canada's vaccine procurement woes captured the national spotlight after vaccine producers Pfizer and Moderna slashed deliveries to the country in recent weeks.

According to the government's vaccine distribution czar, Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin, Canada will likely experience a shortage of vaccine doses through to the end of the first quarter of 2021.

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Existing 3,600 US Troops to Remain on Border With Mexico Through Fiscal Year - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - An estimated 3,600 US troops will remain on the United States' border with Mexico through the current fiscal year, Defense Department spokesperson Lt. Col. Chris Mitchell told Sputnik.

"There are roughly 3,600 personnel supporting that mission, and that number will be there through the end of the FY [fiscal year]," Mitchell said in a statement on Friday.

The troops will provide logistical support to the Department of Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection as they work to secure the US southern border.

On Thursday, the White House said President Joe Biden had informed Congress that he terminated the Trump administration's national emergency at the US southern border.

Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby told reporters that US troops remain on the border because their deployment was already funded during the previous administration.

Between October to January, more than 70,000 illegal migrants have been apprehended on the US-Mexico border. The number of illegal migrants apprehended has been increasing since last April. The last time the number of apprehensions peaked was in May 2019 with 144,116 apprehensions.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik)

EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russia is prepared to end relations with the European Union if the bloc is the initiator of the break-up, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

* If Russia faces restrictions and any unfriendly moves by the European Union, it should prepare for self-reliance in advance, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement on the relations with the European Union was quoted out of context: Moscow will indeed not initiate breaking ties; it wants to improve relations, Peskov said.

* The European Union has taken note of Lavrov's statement about relations with the bloc, and of Kremlin comments on the matter, European Commission spokesman Peter Stano said.

ITALY FORMS NEW GOVERNMENT

* Former European Central Bank Chairman Mario Draghi on Friday formed the new Italian government and presented the list of ministers to President Sergio Mattarella.

* Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese and Health Minister Roberto Speranza retained their mandates in the new government formed by Mario Draghi.

US REMOVES HOUTHIS TERRORIST DESIGNATION

* The United States will lift next Tuesday its designation of Yemen's Houthi movement as a terrorist organization, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said.

* The United States will keep the three senior Houthi leaders on its terror list while lifting the movement's designation as a terrorist organization and will impose new sanctions on some of its members, especially those behind recent ship and missile attacks, Blinken said.

NORD STREAM 2

* Construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline will resume next week after a brief stop due to bad weather, Spiegel reported on Friday.

* US-German negotiations on the lifting of sanctions on Nord Stream 2 are ongoing at the ministerial level, the outcome is still difficult to predict, a source familiar with the talks told Sputnik.

EARTHQUAKE IN INDIA

* Strong earthquake hit central India, with tremors felt in the country's capital of New Delhi, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

* Russia's Gamaleya research institute is completing the second phase of clinical trials of the Sputnik Light vaccine against the coronavirus, Gamaleya chief Alexander Gintsburg said.

NAVALNY CASE

* The Magistrate's Court of Moscow's district of Yuzhnoye Medvedkovo postponed the hearing on the case of Alexey Navalny, who is accused of libel against veteran of the Great Patriotic War, for February 16, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the courtroom.

* Consideration of the appeal against the decision to replace Navalny's suspended sentence in the Yves Rocher case with a real prison term is scheduled for February 20 in the Moscow City Court, his lawyer Olga Mikhailova told Sputnik.

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US Defense Chief Authorizes 20 More Teams to Back FEMA at Vaccination Sites - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has authorized 20 more teams to be deployed at vaccination sites through the United States in support of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Defense Department Press Secretary John Kirby said during a news conference.

"Additionally, I want to tell you that Secretary has authorized an additional 20 teams to support FEMA at vaccination sites around the country," Kirby said on Friday.

Kirby explained the support first team of 222 personnel has arrived in California and is expected to be operational by Monday.

The press secretary also said that there soon will be more information on another four previously announced teams.

The number of Defense Department active duty personnel supporting or prepared to support FEMA exceeds 4700, Kirby added.

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US Lawmakers Call for Probe Into New York State's Handling of Nursing Home Death Data

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - US House Republicans representing the state of New York urged the Justice Department on Friday to open a probe into allegations Governor Andrew Cuomo's administration withheld information on the number of coronavirus deaths in nursing homes.

The call comes after reports in media stating that secretary to the governor Melissa DeRosa during a video conference call with state Democratic leaders admitted that the administration withheld from the federal government the actual information on the death toll in nursing homes, fearing it would be used against them.

"It is now being reported that the Cuomo administration has admitted to knowingly withholding information on New York State's nursing home deaths out of fear it would be used against them as part of a federal investigation," the letter said on Friday. "We request your department immediately open an obstruction of justice investigation into Governor Cuomo and his administration."

The letter was sent by the New York Republican Congressional delegation, including Representatives Lee Zeldin, Elise Stefanik, Chris Jacobs, Nicole Malliotakis, Andrew Gabarino, Tom Reed, John Katko, and Claudia Tenney.

Last month, New York's Attorney General's Office said that the state's health department undercounted coronavirus-related deaths at nursing homes by as much as 50 percent.

New York was one of the biggest COVID-19 hotspots at the height of the pandemic's breakout in the first half of 2020.

At the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak, the state had about 18,000 people in hospital and there were roughly 800 people dying a day from complications caused by the virus. As of Wednesday, there were 8,520 COVID-related hospitalizations in the state and 162 deaths.

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NATO Mission in Afghanistan Will Be Part of Next Week's Ministerial Discussion - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The NATO mission in Afghanistan will be part of talks at the alliance's ministerial next week, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said during a news conference on Friday.

"There is no question that the NATO mission in Afghanistan will be a topic of discussion at the defense ministerial," Kirby said.

The information from the talks will help Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in advising President Joe Biden on the US approach in Afghanistan, he added.

The United States has not yet decided on its troop presence in Afghanistan amid ongoing negotiations with the Taliban movement and concerns over not meeting its commitments under the peace agreement the two sides reached last February.

According to US media reports, NATO officials predict that coalition forces could remain in Afghanistan past April, which would violate an agreement reached by the administration of former US President Donald Trump with Taliban negotiators.

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban movement signed a peace deal in Doha, Qatar, stipulating a gradual withdrawal of US troops as well as the beginning of intra-Afghan negotiations and prisoner exchanges. The talks were delayed multiple times until the Afghan government and the Taliban managed to agree on the prisoner exchange process. The Afghan government and the Taliban launched peace talks in Doha in September of last year.

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US Concerned Russia, China Trying to Make Diplomatic Progress With Vaccines - White House

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is concerned Russia and China are trying to make diplomatic progress with the global distribution of their coronavirus vaccines, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"Certainly we've seen attempts by other countries, China and Russia, to use vaccines as a means of making progress diplomatically... we watch those actions with concern," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki said President Joe Biden has been engaged with world leaders, conveying that the United States will return to the world stage, and the administration is working to do that through a range of actions.

A recent peer-reviewed study published in The Lancet journal stated that Sputnik V, which was developed by Russia's Gamaleya Research Center of Epidemiology and Microbiology, showed 91.6 percent efficacy, based on Phase 3 clinical trial interim data.

The vaccine, which is built on a human adenoviral vector platform, was registered by the Russian government on August 11. Over 20 countries have already registered Sputnik V for emergency use.

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US Coordination on North Korea Ongoing, Very Active - State Department

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - US coordination with allies on denuclearizing North Korea is very active and ongoing, State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Friday.

"I would not put a timeline on when you might see the next step in this process, but that coordination is ongoing, it is very active," Price said during a telephonic press briefing. "We're in close contact and touch with our partners and allies."

US President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the North Korea issue with their counterparts across the world, he added.

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Biden Admin. Aims to Close Guantanamo Bay Prison by End of Term in Office - White House

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration intends to close the Guantanamo Bay detention center by the end of President Joe Biden's term in office, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Friday.

"That certainly is our goal and intention," Psaki said when asked whether Biden will close the Guantanamo Bay detention center by the end of his term in office.

Psaki added that the Biden administration still needs to fill key positions in various agencies before moving forward on the matter.

The prison for international terrorists was established at the US naval base on the shore of Guantanamo Bay in Cuba after the 2001 War on Terror. The facility has long been criticized for mistreatment of prisoners and abuses, with human rights activists and international organizations calling for its closure.

In 2009, President Barack Obama signed an order to shut down the facility, but failed to deliver on it. His successor, Donald Trump, repelled the order. In total, roughly 780 prisoners have been kept in Guantanamo since its opening.

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Canada's Wholesale Sales Drop for First Time Since April - Statistics Agency

TORONTO, February 12 (Sputnik) - Canadian wholesale sales in the month of December fell by 1.3 percent, the first decline since a record drop in April, the state statistics agency said on Friday.

"Wholesale sales fell 1.3% in December to C\$66.5 billion [\$52.36 billion USD], the first decline after seven consecutive increases," Statistics Canada said in its monthly wholesale trade report. Statistics Canada said the decline was led by the automotive industry, with motor vehicle and motor vehicle parts sales dropping 4.3 percent to \$8.42 billion. In a separate report, the agency revealed that new vehicle sales and revenues declined by 36 percent and 31 percent, respectively, since August,

Seven of the ten Canadian provinces reported a decline in sales, with Ontario experiencing the sharpest drop, where sales were down for the second straight month.

Canadian business experts and officials have warned that the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic that began in late 2020 could hamper the country's economy in the first part of 2021. The Bank of Canada expects that the resurgence of the pandemic will place the country back into recession territory in the first quarter 2021.

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UPDATE - Canada Hotel Quarantine, Other Entry Measures to Take Effect on February 22 – Minister

TORONTO, February 12 (Sputnik) - Canada's new enhanced entry requirements, including the out-of-pocket hotel quarantine for incoming air passengers, will come into effect on February 22, Canadian Health Minister Patty Hajdu said on Friday.

"As of February 22, 2021, all air non-essential travelers will be required to take a COVID-19 molecular test when they arrive in Canada before exiting the airport," Hajdu said. "Air travelers will also be required to reserve, prior to departure to Canada, a three-night stay in government-authorized hotel. Travelers will be required to stay at their reserved hotel for up to three nights at their own cost, while they await the results of their arrival test."

For connecting passengers, they will need to reserve a hotel room in the city of their arrival and await the coronavirus test results there before continuing their journey, Hajdu explained.

Those who test negative for the disease will be allowed to spend the rest of the 14-day quarantine period at home, while those who test positive will be transferred to a state isolation facility. Inbound passengers will be required to take an additional COVID-19 test towards the tail end of the 14-day quarantine, Hajdu said.

The new measures will also impact travelers at the land border with the United States. Arrivals at the land border crossing will be required to take a COVID-19 test upon entry into Canada and towards the end of their isolation term, Hajdu added. These additional measures also take effect on February 22.

The minister also reiterated that the government's requirement to present a negative COVID-19 test upon entry at the land border takes effect on February 15. Officials acknowledge that constitutional provisions prevent border agents from stopping those without a negative test from re-entering. However, to combat possible circumvention of the new measure, those who do not present a negative test could face fines of up to \$2,360, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau previously said.

The new measures are already being met with backlash, with some likening them to internment camps. The Canadian Constitution Foundation (CCF) has said that the hotel quarantine plan violates citizens' rights to mobility and has indicated a willingness to challenge the measures in court.

Although the Canadian government is constitutionally prohibited from barring citizens from leaving the country, the Trudeau government has used the enhanced border security measures to discourage international travel amid the pandemic.

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Trump's Lawyers Say Impeachment 'Unjust Vengeance,' Urge Senate to Reject It

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - Donald Trump's lawyer Michael van der Veen urged the US Senate on Friday to reject the Article of Impeachment as an unjust and blatantly unconstitutional act of political vengeance.

"Like every other politically motivated witch-hunt the left has engaged over the past four years, this impeachment is completely divorced from the facts, the evidence and the interest of the American people. The Senate should promptly and decisively vote to reject it," van der Veen said in his opening arguments during the Senate trial.

Van der Veen denounced the impeachment attempt as an appalling abuse of the Constitution that only further divides the nation when it should try to come together around shared priorities. The lawyer dismissed as "patently absurd on its face" the allegations that Trump incited insurrection with his January 6 speech that preceded the incident by a group of his supporters at the Capitol. In the speech, Trump called on his supporters to let their voices be heard "peacefully and patriotically." However, a group entered the Capitol to protest the lawmakers' acceptance of electoral slates from several US states Trump claims are invalid and robbed him of election victory.

"Nothing in the text could ever be construed as encouraging, condoning or enticing unlawful activity of any kind. The President's remarks explicitly encouraged those in attendance to exercise their rights peacefully and patriotically," van der Veen said.

The lawyer claimed that the rally was supposed to be a peaceful event, like previous pro-Trump gatherings, but was tragically hijacked by an extremist group for its own purposes. Van der Veen noted that Trump demanded violent rioters be imprisoned for as long as the law allows. Van der Veen said an Antifa activist was among those arrested who was "sadly the first to be released," and accused the Washington, DC Democratic municipality of resisting the deployment of reinforcements ahead of the rally.

The lawyer defended Trump's efforts to question and challenge the 2020 election result as "squared on proper civic process," adding that Democrats have for years alleged the 2016 election was stolen by Russian hackers and warned that the impeachment poses a threat to freedom of speech as it seeks to smear and cancel the 75 million Trump supporters .

"This unprecedented effort is not about Democrats opposing political violence. It is about Democrats trying to disqualify their political opposition. It is constitutional cancel culture," van der Veen said. "History will record this shameful effort as a deliberate attempt by the Democrat Party to smear, censor and cancel not just President Trump, but the 75 million Americans who voted for him."

Video clips screened at the Senate showed Trump preaching law and order on multiple occasions and Democrats failing to condemn violence that marred Black Lives Matter and Antifa riots across the country.

In an attempt to fend off attacks on Trump for the appeal to his supporters to fight "like Hell," the lawyers also rolled out a compilation of Democratic leader using similar expressions. "We fight this fight... Fight on, fight on," Vice President Kamala Harris was heard saying in one of the videos.

"It's the word people use. It's OK. But, please, stop the hypocrisy," another member of Trump's defense team, David Schoen, said.

Van der Veen confirmed that the lawyers plan to take some four hours of 16 hours allotted for their presentation, clearing the way for the Senators to debate and vote on the case.

The result may be arrived at as early as this weekend and is very likely to be in favor of the former President given the apparent lack of a two-thirds majority needed to convict him.

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US Justice Dept. Charges Man for Threatening Lawmakers, Other Officials - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - A New York City resident has been charged for threatening current and former officials, including members of Congress, Department of Justice said in a statement on Friday.

"Rickey Johnson was arrested last night based on a criminal Complaint filed in Manhattan federal court charging Johnson with making threatening interstate communications and threatening United States officials," the statement said.

Johnson, 47, allegedly posted public videos on Instagram expressing his desire to kill a US Senator, a member of the US House of Representatives and other current and former elected officials, the statement said, adding that he also threatened several cable news broadcasters.

"Johnson, as alleged in this federal complaint, took aim at the foundations of our shared democracy and way of life, threatening not only elected United States officials but several working journalists," New York Police Department Commissioner Dermot Shea said. Johnson is expected to appear before Manhattan federal court later on Friday. If found guilty, he may face up to ten years in prison.

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Biden Admin. Aims to Close Guantanamo Bay Prison by End of Term in Office - White House

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration intends to close the Guantanamo Bay detention center by the end of President Joe Biden's term in office, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Friday.

"That certainly is our goal and intention," Psaki said when asked whether Biden will close the Guantanamo Bay detention center by the end of his term in office.

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UN Welcomes Human Rights Council Adopting Myanmar Resolution - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 12 (Sputnik) - UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday that the Human Rights Council's (HRC) adoption of a resolution condemning the military coup in Myanmar is an important step.

Earlier in the day, the Geneva-based HRC adopted a joint UK-EU-sponsored resolution that deplores the recent seizure of power by the Myanmar military and calls for the release of all detained during and after the coup.

"I think the passage of this resolution of the Human Rights Council is a very important step as it shows that the international community will speak strongly, calling for the reversal of the events we've seen in Myanmar," Dujarric said.

The UN spokesperson added that the UN Secretariat would study the resolution and abide by its demands.

The document, seen by Sputnik, asks UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to increase assistance, resources and expertise to the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar to assess the current situation, including by conducting an urgent visit to the country.

On February 1, the Myanmar military seized power and arrested State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and other top officials after accusing them of election fraud. The military declared a state of emergency for one year, pledging to hold a new election after it expires.

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Canada Hotel Quarantine, Other Entry Measures to Take Effect on February 22 - Minister

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"As of February 22, 2021, all air non-essential travelers will be required to take a COVID-19 molecular test when they arrive in Canada before exiting the airport," Hajdu said. "Air travelers will also be required to reserve, prior to departure to Canada, a three-night stay in government-authorized hotel. Travelers will be required to stay at their reserved hotel for up to three nights at their own cost, while they await the results of their arrival test."

For connecting passengers, they will need to reserve a hotel room in the city of their arrival and await the coronavirus test results there before continuing their journey, Hajdu explained.

Those who test negative for the disease will be allowed to spend the rest of the 14-day quarantine period at home, while those who test positive will be transferred to a state isolation facility. Inbound passengers will be required to take an additional COVID-19 test towards the tail end of the 14-day quarantine, Hajdu said.

The new measures will also impact travelers at the land border with the United States. Arrivals at the land border crossing will be required to take a COVID-19 test upon entry into Canada and towards the end of their isolation term, Hajdu added. These additional measures also take effect on February 22.

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UN Views US Reversal of Houthi Terrorist Designation as 'Extremely Positive' - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 12 (Sputnik) - The United Nations considers the decision of the United States to reverse the designation of Yemen's Houthi movement as a foreign terrorist organization to be an extremely positive move, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Friday.

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said earlier in the day that the United States will lift its designation of Yemen's rebel Houthi movement as a terrorist organization next Tuesday.

"What we have seen in terms of words and acts from the US, I think it's been extremely positive," Dujarric said. "The reversal of the designation, the naming of the Special Envoy and the clear-clear language from President Biden himself, expressing his strong support for the UN-led mediation process... are very-very welcomed."

Dujarric also expressed hope that the revocation of the designation will help to build momentum for a political solution to Yemen's conflict.

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

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UN Special Rapporteur Urges US, EU to Drop Unilateral Sanctions on Venezuela - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, February 12 (Sputnik) - UN Special Rapporteur Alena Douhan on Friday called on the United States and the European Union to end the unilateral sanctions they have imposed on Venezuela.

"The devastating effect of sanctions imposed is multiplied by extra-territoriality and over-compliance adversely affecting public and private sectors, Venezuela citizens, non-governmental organizations, third-country national and companies. Humanitarian exemptions are lengthy, costly, ineffective and inefficient," Douhan said after undertaking a two-week visit to Venezuela.

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UN Peacekeeper Dies After Wednesday's Attack on MINUSMA Mission Base in Mali - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 12 (Sputnik) - A Togolese peacekeeper who was injured in an attack against the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) earlier this week has died, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

"One of our Togolese peacekeepers who had been wounded during Wednesday's attack has succumbed from his injuries," Dujarric said.

On Wednesday, 28 peacekeepers were wounded in an attack on MINUSMA's temporary base in Kerena, located near the city of Douentza in central Mali.

MINUSMA is considered to be the deadliest mission the United Nations operates anywhere in the world. Since the beginning of the year, the mission has lost six peacekeepers in violence perpetrated by armed groups.

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Trump's Lawyers Present Case for Acquittal on Day 4 of Impeachment Trial

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - Donald Trump's lawyers took to the US Senate floor on Friday, the fourth day of the impeachment trial, to make the case for acquitting the former president over last month's incident at the Capitol building.

Media reported earlier that Trump's defense team plans to use just three or four hours out of 16 allotted for the presentation clearing the way for the Senators to debate and vote on the case. The verdict may be passed as early as this weekend and is very likely to be in favor of the former president being acquitted.

By contrast, the US House impeachment managers spent two days trying to prove that Trump is guilty of inciting insurrection and as such should be disqualified from any future public office including an opportunity to run for President in 2024.

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US Treasury Chief Vows Multilateral Engagement With G7 to Solve Global Issues - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said during a virtual meeting with her G7 counterparts and central bank governors vowed that the Biden administration is committed to engaging in multilateral efforts with the group to solve global problems, the Treasury Department said on Friday.

"Secretary Yellen emphasized the commitment of the Biden Administration to multilateralism to solve global issues, stating that the United States 'places a high priority on deepening our international engagement and strengthening our alliances,'" the Treasury Department said in a press release.

Yellen also emphasized that it is time to "go big" to provide fiscal support for recovery from the pandemic, especially for low-income countries, the release added.

The Treasury Secretary also underscored the importance to address climate change, according to the release.

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Canada Records 651 Cases of Coronavirus Vaccine Adverse Reactions - Health Official

TORONTO, February 12 (Sputnik) - Canadian health officials have observed 651 cases of adverse reactions in patients who have been vaccinated against the novel coronavirus, the country's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said on Friday.

"As of February 6, there have been 651 reports of adverse events following immunization to date," Tam told reporters, adding that 99 of the cases are considered serious.

Tam stressed the agency monitors all adverse medical events following immunization, and that not all of the side effects are caused by the inoculation.

Canada has administered 1,211,617 vaccine doses as of Friday, according to the COVID19Tracker.ca project.

Several countries, including the United States, Israel and the Netherlands, have reported post-vaccination side effects among those vaccinated against the virus, and authorities are investigating reports of death following inoculation.

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Canadian Provinces Report Upwards of 450 Cases of Coronavirus Variants - Health Official

TORONTO, February 12 (Sputnik) - Health officials in eight of the ten Canadian provinces are reporting more than cases 450 of coronavirus variants, the country's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said on Friday.

"There are now eight provinces reporting more than 429 [UK] variants, 28 [South African] variants and one [Brazilian] variant," Tam told reporters.

At least three of the provinces are reporting community transmission of the variants, with numerous outbreaks being identified in various settings, Tam added.

On Thursday, an expert panel guiding the provincial COVID-19 response in Ontario projected that the UK coronavirus variant, which first appeared in the province at the end of December, would "soon dominate."

UK public health officials in December announced the emergence of the new coronavirus strain that is believed to be up to 70 percent more transmissible. The new strain was first discovered in southeast England in September and subsequently spread rapidly throughout the United Kingdom and continental Europe.

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US to Revoke Terrorist Designation of Yemen's Houthis on February 16 - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The United States will lift its designation of Yemen's Houthis as a terrorist organization next Tuesday, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in a statement.

"Effective February 16, I am revoking the designations of Ansarallah, sometimes referred to as the Houthis, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) under the Immigration and Nationality Act and as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, as amended," Blinken said on Friday.

Blinken emphasized that the decision was taken due to the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen and the revocation aims to ensure US policies do not impede aid.

"We have listened to warnings from the United Nations, humanitarian groups and bipartisan members of Congress, among others, that the designations could have a devastating impact on Yemenis' access to basic commodities like food and fuel," Blinken said. "By focusing on alleviating the humanitarian situation in Yemen, we hope the Yemeni parties can also focus on engaging in dialogue."

Blinken pointed out that the group's leaders Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim will remain designated.

"We will continue to closely monitor the activities of Ansarallah and its leaders and are actively identifying additional targets for designation, especially those responsible for explosive boat attacks against commercial shipping in the Red Sea and UAV and missile attacks into Saudi Arabia," Blinken said. "The United States will also continue to support the implementation of UN sanctions imposed on members of Ansarallah and will continue to call attention to the group's destabilizing activity and pressure the group to change its behavior."

Blinken underscored that Washington is clear-eyed about what he called are Houthis's malign actions, which prolong the conflict in Yemen while exacting serious humanitarian costs.

"We remain committed to helping US partners in the Gulf defend themselves, including against threats arising from Yemen, many of which are carried out with the support of Iran," he said.

"The United States will redouble its efforts, alongside the United Nations and others, to end the war itself. We reaffirm our strong belief that there is no military solution to this conflict."

Blinken also said the United States urges all parties to work toward a lasting political solution, which is the only means to durably end the humanitarian crisis afflicting the people of Yemen. Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthi rebels since 2014. A coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia launched a military operation to support the internationally recognized Hadi government in 2015. The Houthis continue to maintain control over a vast part in the north of the country, including the capital of Sanaa.

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US to Maintain Sanctions on 3 Houthi Leaders, Identify New Targets - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The United States will keep three senior Houthi leaders on its terror list while lifting the group's designation as a terrorist entity and will impose new sanctions on some members, especially those behind recent ship and missile attacks, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said on Friday.

"Ansarallah leaders Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim remain sanctioned under E.O. 13611 related to acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen," Blinken said. "We will continue to closely monitor the activities of Ansarallah and its leaders and are actively identifying additional targets for designation, especially those responsible for explosive boat attacks against commercial shipping in the Red Sea and UAV and missile attacks into Saudi Arabia."

Blinken said the US would formally revoke the group's terrorist designation on February 16.

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More Than Half All Americans Still Working Remotely to Avoid Spreading COVID-19 - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - More than half of all Americans continue to work remotely to avoid exposing themselves or otherwise spreading the novel coronavirus, a new Gallup poll revealed on Friday.

"As the pandemic stretches into its 11th month, a solid majority of US workers continue to report they are working remotely all or part of the time in order to avoid catching or spreading the coronavirus," Gallup said. "The 56 percent working remotely in January is statistically similar to the 58 percent recorded in each of the prior four months."

Gallup first asked US workers in April 2020 whether they were working remotely and the rate was at a high point of 70 percent, the polling organization noted.

"It dwindled in each subsequent month before leveling off at 58 percent in September," Gallup said.

The percentage of US workers "sometimes" working remotely has been fairly steady at just over 20 percent for most of the trend, while the proportion "never" doing so has increased from 31 percent to 44 percent, it added.

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UNICEF, Pfizer Sign Agreement to Deliver 40Mln Coronavirus Vaccines in 2021 - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, February 12 (Sputnik) - The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said in a statement on Friday it had signed an agreement with Pfizer pharmaceutical company to acquire 40 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine through 2021.

"This supply agreement allows UNICEF to procure doses out of the up to 40 million doses that have been secured under the COVAX Facility's Advance Purchase Agreement (APA) with Pfizer/BioNTech to be available throughout 2021," the statement said.

Countries that were allocated Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine doses in the COVAX allocation will start receiving the vaccine as early as the first quarter of 2021, the statement said.

It added that UNICEF has been cooperating with partners to ensure that governments have ultra-cold chain storage required to store and distribute coronavirus vaccines.

The COVAX facility is a global initiative to provide the world with coronavirus vaccines affordable to all countries. It aims to distribute at least two billion doses of approved vaccines by the end of 2021.

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US Deploys JSTARS Target Attack Surveillance Aircraft to Base in Germany - Air Force

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has sent an E-8C JSTARS target attack surveillance radar aircraft to operate out of a major air base in western Germany, the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS) said in a news report on Friday.

"The US Air Force has deployed the E-8C Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS) aircraft to Ramstein Air Base, Germany to conduct training with Europe-based units," the report said.

The E-8C is an airborne battle management, command and control, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platform with the primary mission of providing theater ground and air commanders with situational awareness to support military operations, the report said.

"During their time in the European theater, the aircraft and airmen will participate in training exercises and events that demonstrate the ...US commitment to NATO allies, enhance interoperability with multinational partners and deter any actions that destabilize regional security," the report said.

The E-8C is a modified Boeing 707-300 commercial airframe fitted with radar, communications, operations and control subsystems, the report added.

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US, United Arab Emirates Hold Joint Desert Combat Exercise - Central Command

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The US military has conducted its first joint land combat exercise with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Central Command (CENTCOM) announced in a news report on Friday. "Soldiers from the US Task Force Spartan and the UAE Land Forces gathered from January 24 to February 6, 2021, at Al Hamra Training Center in the United Arab Emirates for Iron Union 14, the first bi-lateral training exercise between the forces since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic," the report stated.

CENTCOM said the exercise was designed to strengthen military-to-military relationships and allowed the forces deployed to train how they might address regional security challenges. "The UAE is a significant partner for the US within the region, and exercises such as 'Iron Union' demonstrate a commitment by all participating nations to promote regional stability," the report said.

The exercises provided an opportunity for both countries to build tactical proficiency in critical mission areas, gain an understanding of each other's forces, and support long-term regional stability, the report added.

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Biden Says 'Anxious' to See How Republicans Vote on Trump Impeachment

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Friday that he is anxious to see how Republicans will vote in the impeachment trial for former President Donald Trump.

"I'm just anxious to see whether - what my Republican friends do, if they stand up," Biden said. Biden added that he was not going to speak with any of Republican Senators about how they should vote.

On Thursday, 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.

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

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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US to Start Reopening Southern Border to Asylum-Seekers on February 19 - DHS

WASHINGTON, February 12 (Sputnik) - The United States next week will begin reopening the southern border to asylum-seekers who the Trump administration forced to remain in Mexico while awaiting immigration court hearings, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a statement on Friday.

"Beginning on February 19, the Department of Homeland Security will begin phase one of a program to restore safe and orderly processing at the southwest border. DHS will begin processing people who had been forced to 'remain in Mexico' under the Migrant Protection Protocols," the statement said.

The move marks a first step toward overturning the Trump administration's Migrant Protection Protocols, also known as the 'remain in Mexico' policy, which since being implemented in January 2019 has forced migrants to wait in Mexico while their asylum claims are processed in the United States.

Around 25,000 migrants are currently waiting at the border under the program, DHS said.

"This latest action is another step in our commitment to reform immigration policies that do not align with our nation's values," Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said in the statement.

Mayorkas cautioned, however, that the initial phase of the reopening would be limited and changes would take time.

"Individuals who are not eligible under this initial phase should wait for further instructions and not travel to the border. Due to the current pandemic, restrictions at the border remain in place and will be enforced," he said.

All migrants processed under the new program will be tested for COVID-19 before being allowed to enter the United States, DHS said.

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RPT - Hundreds of Canadian Small Businesses Defy Lockdown Orders in Day of Protest

TORONTO, February 12 (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.