

02/17/21 Wednesday

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At Least Seven People Shot in Mass Shooting Near Transit Station in North Philadelphia
by [Mary F.](#)

At least seven people were shot in a mass shooting near the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) station in North Philadelphia's Olney neighborhood at 3 p.m. local time on Wednesday, multiple sources reported.

Authorities have revealed that one suspect is already in custody and two guns have been recovered from the scene. No information regarding the suspect has yet been disclosed. According to Philadelphia Police Commissioner Danielle Outlaw, the victims' ages range from 17 to 70. Six victims were transported to the Albert Einstein Medical Center while the seventh victim was taken to Temple University Hospital, [NBC Philadelphia reported](#). One of the victims is in critical condition while the other six sustained non-life-threatening injuries, [ABC 6 reported](#).

A Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority spokesperson confirmed to [AP](#) that the shooting occurred near, but not on the transit station property, and that no transit employees were injured.

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Biden Distances Himself From Psaki Comments on Schools Opening One Day a Week
by [Mary F.](#)

White House Press Secretary Ken Psaki earlier this month said that the Biden administration hopes to have in-person teaching "at least one day a week in the majority of schools by day 100," an objective that has been criticized by parents, teachers, students and local officials. During a CNN town hall on Tuesday night, Biden distanced himself from previous comments by Psaki that the administration hopes to have more than 50% of schools open at least one day per week during his first 100 days in office.

When asked if Psaki's comments were accurate, Biden clarified: "No, that's not true. That's what was reported; that's not true. There was a mistake in the communication."

"But what I -- what I'm talking about is, I said opening the majority of schools in K-through-eighth grade because they're the easiest to open, the most needed to be opened, in terms of the impact on children and families having to stay home ... I think we'll be close to that at the end of the first hundred days," Biden added, referring to elementary and middle schools.

In a Tuesday tweet, Psaki also [clarified](#) that the Biden administration wants all schools 100% as soon as possible but the 100-day goal is "not the ceiling."

In addition, Biden also stated Tuesday that schools may be open over the summer to make up for lost time for students.

"My guess is they're probably going to be pushing to open all summer to continue like it's a different semester," Biden noted, [Fox News reported](#), also noting that the current lack of in-person learning is affecting students.

"The loss of being able to be in school is having significant impact on children, and parents as well," Biden explained.

Earlier this month, Biden also called reopening schools a national priority.

"It should be a national priority to get our kids back into school and keep them in school," Biden said, [AP reported](#). "If Congress provides the funding, we need to protect students, educators and staff. If states and cities put strong public health measures in place that we all follow, then my team will work to see that the majority of our schools can be open by the end of my first 100 days."

However, Psaki previously made a contradictory comment about schools not being open in the summer.

During a White House briefing last week, Psaki said: "Schools won't be in session for the summer, but this is a pandemic we're working to get under control, making progress every month. And we're certainly hopeful that things will be — more kids will be back in school five days a week as quickly as it can safely happen."

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DoD Reveals That Nearly One Third of US Service Members Have Declined COVID-19 Vaccine by [Mary F.](#)

Two vaccines, developed by Pfizer and Moderna, are being distributed in the US. Both vaccines use messenger RNA, or mRNA, which is the set of instructions used by cells to make proteins. mRNA vaccines are a relatively new type of treatment that work by providing instructions to healthy cells to generate antibodies for a certain virus or bacterium.

During a House hearing on the Armed Forces' response to COVID-19, Maj. Gen Jeff Taliaferro, Vice Director for Operations, revealed that a third of service members have declined to receive COVID-19 vaccines.

"I think our initial look — and this is of course very early data — is acceptance rates are somewhere in the two-thirds territory, and of course it varies by different groups," Taliaferro said, [The Hill reported](#).

Taliaferro also noted service members who were not vaccinated with the COVID-19 vaccine were deployable, noting that the "services and commands" that were established over the past year have allowed the Armed Forces to operate in a "COVID environment."

During the same hearing, Maj. Gen. Steven Nordhaus also stated that COVID-19 vaccinations were voluntary for military members.

Army Maj. César Santiago in late January made a similar statement, noting that "the number on declinations is not available at this time as this gets into the fact that taking the vaccine is on a

volunteer basis and we adhere to the intent of the guidance that's been put under the emergency use authorization," [Task and Purpose reported](#). In January, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) requested the Department of Defense's (DoD) aid in distributing COVID-19 vaccines at FEMA sites. However, the DoD has not provided any public information on how many service members have been vaccinated. Earlier this month, the [Military Times](#) revealed that the DoD has made it a policy not to report details on who had taken the vaccine. The DoD does publicly publish information on the number of COVID-19 infections. The [latest tally](#) shows that there are more than 152,000 military cases of COVID-19.

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Lawmakers Urge Biden to Reverse Trump's 'Misguided' Recognition of Morocco's Western Sahara Claims

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The previous Trump administration bargained several Arab states into normalizing relations with Israel, but now that US President Joe Biden has taken office, some of those benefits, such as F-35 fighters potentially being sold to the United Arab Emirates, have been walked back. In [a Thursday letter](#), a bipartisan group of more than two dozen congress members urged Biden to reverse the "misguided" decision by former US President Donald Trump to recognize Morocco's long standing claim to rule Western Sahara.

"The abrupt decision by the previous administration on December 11, 2020, to officially recognize the Kingdom of Morocco's illegitimate claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara was short-sighted, undermined decades of consistent US policy, and alienated a significant number of African nations," the lawmakers wrote, led by Sens. Jim Inhofe (R-OK) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT).

"We respectfully urge you to reverse this misguided decision and recommit the United States to the pursuit of a referendum on [self-determination for the Sahrawi](#) people of Western Sahara," they added.

"The fate of the Sahrawi people has been in limbo since the United Nations first adopted a resolution calling for a referendum on self-determination in 1966. For more than five decades following the United Nations' action, the simple and fundamental goal of the Sahrawi people to freely decide, for themselves, their fate has been stymied and subjected to broken promise after broken promise," the letter notes.

"The United States owes it to the Sahrawi people to honor our commitment, to help ensure the Moroccans live up to theirs, and to see this referendum through. The Sahrawi people deserve the right to freely choose their own destiny."

Trump Decision Steals Saharawi Fighters

The December decision was part of a deal by which Morocco also agreed to [normalize relations with Israel](#), the last of [several Arab nations](#) to do so following promises of Washington largesse.

However, even staunch supporters of Israel in Washington [criticized Trump's decision](#), which also invited denunciations by several US allies and other world powers, such as Russia. A few weeks later, Moroccan Foreign Minister [Nasser Bourita told Axios](#) he hoped the incoming Biden administration would “find a good rationale to preserve” Trump’s decision, saying it was “done for peace.”

In November, a 29-year peace between Morocco and the Polisario Front, which the UN recognizes as the legitimate representative of the indigenous Saharawi people, was called off after Moroccan troops [attacked a sit-in](#) demonstration by Saharawi activists at a crossing on Western Sahara’s southern border with Mauritania. Following the [outbreak of war](#), Moroccan police cracked down on Saharawi activists in Morocco and the parts of Western Sahara Morocco controls, besieging their houses, beating them, and throwing them in jail.

Omeima Abdeslam, the Polisario Front representative to Switzerland, [told Sputnik in December](#) that Trump’s move “has [made] the Saharawis more united and more persistent to get their independence by all means, including the armed struggle ... and will not end until total independence.”

Morocco’s Crackdown

On Saturday, [Moroccan police attacked](#) the home of Saharawi human rights activist Sultana Khaya, beating her and her sister, Elwaara, which sparked a series of protests in Western Saharan cities in the days after.

Unique among UN mandates, the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) has no human rights monitoring mechanism, which Saharawi activists have long demanded, saying it gives Moroccan security forces free reign to violate their rights.

The US lawmakers called attention in their letter to Morocco’s repeated attempts to frustrate negotiations for holding the promised independence referendum, noting Rabat “effectively walked away from the negotiations” in 1998, “declaring they would never accept a referendum that included independence as a potential outcome, despite years of promises otherwise.” “Tragically, Morocco’s unwillingness to negotiate in good faith has been a consistent theme over the years,” they added. “The previous administration’s decision to recognize their claims has only served to reward decades of bad behavior by the Moroccan government.”

Before 1975, the territory was the Spanish colony of Spanish Sahara, but when the Spanish left, Morocco and Mauritania both laid claim to the land. However, the Saharawis declared their own Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic and their forces soon pushed Mauritania out of the country while fighting Morocco until a 1991 peace deal. The harsh desert terrain holds rich deposits of phosphates, and just off the coast sit valuable fisheries and, it is believed, petroleum deposits beneath the seafloor.

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‘Deeply Satisfying’: Netizens Rejoice as Trump’s Atlantic City Casino Gets Dynamited
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Former US President Donald Trump once boasted of the “incredible” profits he made at his Atlantic City hotels, but by the time the Trump Taj Mahal, the last of his three hotels there, closed in 2016, the president-to-be was widely reviled by city residents.

Folks on the New Jersey coast and across the country rejoiced on Wednesday morning over an unassuming event: a building demolition. However, this wasn’t just any derelict coming down - it was Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City.

“Are you watching the Trump implosion?” asked [satirist Jeremy Newburger](#) in a Thursday morning tweet, noting how the former US president was steadily turning on all his [former political allies](#).

“No, I meant in Atlantic City. Trump Plaza is imploding.”

Built in 1984, Trump Plaza was the first of three casinos Trump owned during an attempted foray into the gambling business. The failed 34-story hotel had stood vacant since 2014, an eyesore on the Atlantic City skyline. Three thousand sticks of dynamite tore through the structure, collapsing it in on itself at about 9 am Wednesday.

“This is not about President Trump, because, quite frankly, the people here in the great city of Atlantic City knew how the presidency was going to play out on a national stage because we’re one of the cities that knew him best,” Atlantic City Mayor Marty Small told an assembled crowd after the demolition. The city hosted a VIP breakfast event with front-row seats for the event, the proceeds of which were donated to a local charity, according to the [New York Times](#).

However, for many folks on the internet, it was very clearly about Trump, the twice-impeached former head of state who escaped conviction for a second time last week after the [Senate acquitted him](#) of accusations he had incited the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol by his supporters.

“Watching the Trump Plaza Casino implode is the catharsis the country needs right now,” said one Twitterer.

Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who narrowly lost the 2016 presidential election to Trump, simply posted a waving emoji.

One person mused that it was finally “infrastructure week,” the seven-day-long focus on transit repair and expansion plans that Trump repeatedly promised but failed to deliver through his four-year presidency.

However, some folks just really wanted to see a building explode. “I’ve just always wanted to see a building come down,” one New Jerseyite who came to see the demolition told the Times. “I’ve never seen one in person.”

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Video: Moroccan Police Beat Saharawi Peace Activists, Sparking Protests, Army Deployment by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Saharawis and their supporters have long decried the unique situation of MINURSO, the United Nations mission to Western Sahara, as the UN’s only mandate that lacks a human rights monitoring mechanism.

Journalists in the Western Saharan capital of Laayoune have reported a dramatic increase in Moroccan police and military units after police brutally attacked a Saharawi activist, sparking widespread demonstrations.

Equipe Media posted a video recorded in the northern city of Laayoune on Tuesday, showing widespread deployment of police units, which the outlet describes as a “military siege .. to face any type of protests that may arise.”

On February 13, Moroccan police were reported to have “brutally attacked” Saharawi human rights activist Sultana Khaya and her sister, Elwaara, at their home in the coastal city of Bojador. According to [Sahara Press Service](#), the two women were beaten by police, with Soltana suffering a serious eye injury and Elwarra’s jaw being broken after being [hit with stones](#). Footage captured during the incident shows Elwaara clinging to her front door as plainclothes Moroccan security forces drag her from her house.

Warning: the videos below may be disturbing to some viewers

Protesters subsequently skirmished with police outside Khaya’s home in the following days, after they came to show their support for the activists. “Abandoned by the international community, Saharawi youth flock to Sultana’s home in show of solidarity,” media collective Saharawi Voice tweeted on Monday, adding that “these events are illegal in occupied Western Sahara.”

Soltana told SPS the attack was “the price to pay for the struggle, and I knew I had to pay the price. I was prepared for it, still I am, and perhaps even more so now than ever.”

The activist is no stranger to police repression: during widespread student protests at Moroccan universities in 2007, Khaya was beaten and arrested during a sit-in demonstration in Marrakech, resulting in the loss of an eye, [Reuters reported](#) at the time. After widespread protests swept Morocco and Western Sahara in November and December, police raided Khaya’s house and beat her 84-year-old grandmother before establishing a continuous watch outside, blocking people from leaving or entering the premises, she told [Human Rights Watch](#).

Peace activists in Western Sahara have attracted significant police attention in recent months, since the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic’s (SADR) government-in-exile called off the 29-year peace with Morocco and resumed its [fight for independence](#). Morocco has claimed the territory as its own since Spanish colonizers left in 1975, but the indigenous Saharawi people declared their own republic and appealed to the United Nations for support. In a 1991 peace deal, the UN agreed to facilitate an independence referendum for the territory that has never materialized.

In December 2020, the US agreed to [recognize Morocco’s claims](#) over Western Sahara in exchange for Rabat’s normalization of relations with Israel, sparking additional protests as even the most adamant neoconservatives criticized the Trump administration for shredding the rights of Saharawis.

Abdallah Souilem, the SADR’s charge d’affaires of what SADR calls the “occupied territories,” [told SPS on Wednesday](#) that the “degraded human rights situation in the occupied Sahrawi cities portends a humanitarian catastrophe if the international community does not intervene to dissuade the Moroccan regime.”

Souilem noted that other activists have been harassed as well, including Alina Aba Ali, who was forced to flee the country; Mohamed Salem Ayad Lefkir, whose recent murder was the subject

of an attempted coverup at a Laayoune morgue; and Saharawi detainee Mohamed Lamine Abidine Hadi, who has been on a hunger strike in Tiflet 2 prison [since November](#). On Thursday, several US lawmakers [penned a bipartisan letter](#) to US President Joe Biden urging him to reverse former US President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Morocco's claim, saying the move "served to reward decades of bad behavior by the Moroccan government."

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Iran to Add More Advanced Refining Centrifuges as US Remains Outside Nuclear Deal by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A law passed by Iran's parliament in December requires the country's nuclear program to progressively step back from its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal, so long as Washington continues to hold itself in abeyance of the deal.

Iran has informed the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) of its intent to install two more cascades of advanced IR-2m centrifuges in a move that will further enhance the quantity of the uranium it can produce, the agency said in a recent report.

"Iran indicated it plans to install two additional cascades of 174 IR-2m centrifuges at FEP to enrich ... up to 5% U-235. This will bring the total number of cascades of IR-2m centrifuges either planned, being installed, or operating in FEP to six," the IAEA said in a report to member states obtained by [Reuters on Wednesday](#).

The additional cascades will be installed at the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant (FEP) outside Tehran. The facility [suffered an explosion](#) last July that Iranian authorities said was likely the result of sabotage.

The installation will follow two other cascades already brought on line this year at Natanz that have increased Iran's ability to refine uranium-238 into the more useful uranium-235. While in extremely high purities the radioactive material can be used as the basis for an atomic bomb, at low purity levels Iran is currently producing, a weapon "would not be practicable to design," according to the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, the [US research center](#) responsible for designing many of the Pentagon's nuclear weapons.

While the US and Israel have claimed Iran is close to building a nuclear weapon, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has made clear the country has [a religious objection](#) to the weapons and is not pursuing a bomb.

Iran announced its intent to enhance its refining abilities after the [Majlis passed a law](#) in December requiring a steady departure from the country's obligations under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The US withdrew from the eight-party deal in 2018 on false claims that Iran had violated the deal; however, the deal lived on as no other party agreed with the Trump administration's claims. The deal saw economic sanctions against Iran lowered in exchange for it accepting strict limitations on uranium refining - limitations it has progressively ignored since the US reimposed the sanctions.

In early January, [Ali Akbar Salehi](#), the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), said the country would be installing one thousand of the IR-2m centrifuges, dramatically increasing Iran's enrichment rate from 8 or 9 kilograms per month to 120 kilograms. He also said the maximum purity would increase to 20% U-235 thanks to two cascades of IR6 centrifuges now [installed at Fordow](#) Fuel Enrichment plant, an underground facility to protect it from a [potential Israeli airstrike](#).

Now that US President Joe Biden is in office, the stage would seem set for the US to return to the deal and Iran to return to compliance; instead, the two nations seem caught in a "[no you first](#)" mentality. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking on the Majlis' "Strategic Action to Lift Sanctions" law. Under the law, [on February 21](#), the next step is to bar further IAEA inspectors from Iran if the US has not returned to JCPOA compliance.

The US Department of State [called on Iran](#) on Wednesday to reverse those plans.

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White House Adviser Claims SolarWinds Hack 'Likely of Russian Origin', Affected 9 Federal Agencies
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, reports emerged in mid-December that hackers had infiltrated various government agencies through a system update initiated by SolarWinds' Orion software, which was previously used by major entities, including the US Departments of Homeland Security, Commerce and Treasury.

Anne Neuberger, the deputy national security adviser for cyber and emerging technology, reiterated during a Wednesday White House briefing that the US government [continues to believe](#) the SolarWinds hack was "likely of Russian origin."

Although the investigation into the sophisticated hack is still ongoing and in its early stages, Neuberger indicated that as of Wednesday a total of nine federal agencies and roughly 100 private sector companies were compromised by the "broad and indiscriminate effort" by hackers.

Neuberger estimated that about 18,000 entities - many of which were technology companies - had downloaded the SolarWinds software update. She did not state whether a motive has been established by investigators.

Based in Austin, Texas, the SolarWinds tech company previously disclosed that up to 18,000 of its customers had been potentially affected by the security breach.

"This is challenging," the White House adviser told reporters. "This is a sophisticated actor who did their best to hide their tracks - we believe it took them months to plan and execute this compromise."

"It'll take us time to uncover this layer by layer," she added, telling a reporter that it may take "several months" before officials are able to get a better understanding of how far the hack expanded and who was involved.

Neuberger also stressed the SolarWinds hack was “more than an isolated case of espionage,” and that “the level of knowledge [hackers] showed about the technology and the way they compromised it truly was sophisticated.”

The adviser's update on the matter came more than a month after several US intelligence agencies [released a statement](#) concluding that “an Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) actor, likely Russian in origin, is responsible for most or all of the recently discovered, ongoing cyber compromises of both government and non-governmental networks.”

At the time, officials indicated that they believed the hack was part of an elaborate initiative to gather intelligence on the US government.

Early accusations stemming from the SolarWinds hack were quickly linked to Russia as former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo deemed Moscow was responsible. At the time, then-US President-elect Joe Biden stated he would consider [imposing sanctions](#) against Russia as punishment.

Russia has repeatedly rejected claims that it had any involvement in the massive hacking operation. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [said](#) early on that “any accusations of Russia's involvement are absolutely unfounded and are a continuation of the kind of blind Russophobia that is resorted to following any incident.”

US officials anticipate additional compromises may surface amid the ongoing investigation.

Neuberger also underscored that the Biden administration may soon take executive action to address any security “gaps” that come up within the probe.

Ex-President Donald Trump suggested that China rather than Russia may be responsible for the cyberattacks, adding that the scale of the cyberattacks had been exaggerated by the media and the situation was under control. Trump posted on his Twitter: “...discussing the possibility that it may be China (it may!). There could also have been a hit on our ridiculous voting machines during the election, which is now obvious that I won big, making it an even more corrupted embarrassment for the USA.”

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First Biden-Netanyahu Call Touches on Importance of Ongoing Talks Over ‘Iranian Threat’

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by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier this week, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters during a briefing that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would be the first Middle East leader that US President Joe Biden would speak to since being inaugurated last month.

Biden held a lengthy, nearly hour-long call with Netanyahu on Wednesday in which both political leaders are said to have renewed their commitments to close negotiations regarding regional matters, including the hot-button issue of Iran.

A readout issued by Netanyahu's office points out Biden and Netanyahu discussed “their long-standing personal connection and said that they would work together to continue strengthening the steadfast alliance between Israel and the US.”

The release adds that key topics of discussion included commitments to the “the future advancement of the peace accords, the Iranian threat and regional challenges,” along with promises to “continue their dialogue” on the matter.

The pair also discussed their efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

The call itself was described as “warm and friendly” by Netanyahu’s camp, whereas Biden told reporters in the Oval Office that their conversation was “good.”

Although Biden did not elaborate on the contents of his call with the Israeli prime minister, [a readout](#) released by the White House notes the president also “underscored the importance of working to advance peace throughout the region, including between Israelis and Palestinians.” “Together, they affirmed their shared interest in continued strategic cooperation to confront the many challenges facing the region,” it added.

The call came two days after Iran announced it would not allow snap inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency unless countries involved in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action fulfilled their part of the agreement and lifted sanctions against Tehran by February 21.

The UN watchdog which had previously been conducting examinations at nuclear sites in Iran as part of the Iran nuclear deal, which the US withdrew from under the Trump administration. Talks of rejoining the Obama-era deal have since been taken back up by Biden White House officials; however, it remains unclear how the administration will move forward.

Ahead of his confirmation, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [told lawmakers](#) that the Biden administration intended to initiate a new agreement with Iran, but that it would include new regional partners, such as Israel and other Gulf states. While a timeline for such an agreement has not been provided, Iran has objected to the notion of a new agreement.

Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said last week that the United States must remove sanctions imposed on Iran and return to the nuclear deal if it really wants to discontinue with the policies of the former administration. Zarif stressed that Biden’s administration needs to decide whether the US wants to [turn away from Trump’s policies](#), or build on Trump’s “failures,” which will inevitably lead to more failures on the part of Washington.

Congratulating Biden on the inauguration, Netanyahu, on the contrary, expressed hopes that the new US administration will build upon Trump’s peace efforts in the Middle East, including the normalization deals between Israel and Arab countries the ex-president brokered.

Netanyahu also [called on Biden](#) to cooperate with Israel in confronting “the threat posed by Iran”.

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Utility Company Says Texas Residents May Face Prolonged Power Outages as Water Issues Emerge

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Latest estimates indicate that more than 2.6 million residents living in Texas are without electricity after severe storms blasted the region with frigid temperatures, and a spiked demand for energy caused blackouts from overwhelmed utility plants.

Texas utility company Austin Energy announced on Wednesday that its tens of thousands of customers may be forced to go without electricity for an extended period of time, as officials work to bring service back online.

In a series of tweets, the company [told customers](#) that they “should be prepared to not have power through Wednesday and possibly longer,” as severe weather conditions may hinder efforts to bring the shuttered power grid fully back into service.

“Customers who have sustained outages should expect outages to continue until the situation improves,” reads one of the company’s tweets. “Be careful of downed tree limbs and downed power lines.”

Although Austin Energy noted individuals who currently have power should anticipate losing it as a result of the heavy storm, the company did recently announce it was able to restore power to 16 of its circuits. Rotating power outages will be undertaken by the company to ensure that power is distributed across the board.

Estimates suggest that over 186,000 Austin Energy customers are still without power.

Much of the Lone Star State is presently under freeze, storm and winter weather advisories, with some areas seeing snow accumulations reaching up to 4 inches, according to the National Weather Service. Across the state, many areas have maintained below-freezing temperatures. The Weather Channel [reported](#) the situation has become so dire that carbon monoxide poisoning cases have shot up, as some residents look to alternative means to stay warm. In Harris County, first responders received at least 300 reports of carbon monoxide poisoning on Tuesday alone. [Hypothermia cases](#) have also been on the rise.

During a community meeting, Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo spoke to the recent uptick in poisonings and [told residents](#) that “in many ways, [the cases highlight] a disaster within a disaster.”

Citing Houston Police, local outlet [KTRK reported](#) that a woman and an 8-year-old girl died from carbon monoxide poisoning after a car was purposely left running in an attached garage in order to generate heat.

To make matters worse, reports surfaced Wednesday that Texans were also beginning to deal with water service issues in some parts of the state as a result of the power outages. In Harris County, which includes the city of Houston, a boil-water notice was implemented after blackouts affected water treatment centers.

A similar notice has been issued in Fort Worth, Texas, for roughly [212,000 individuals](#).

According to the [Texas Tribune](#), the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has found that some 8 million residents have had issues with their water service, as approximately 420 public water systems across 120 counties within the state have undergone setbacks.

Power outages have also been reported in Oregon, Kentucky, West Virginia and Louisiana, but have largely paled in comparison to the situation in Texas due to the state’s decadesold effort to skirt federal oversight by operating its own power grid.

With questions being raised over the state’s poor response compared to actions undertaken by other US states, experts have called for an in-depth investigation into how Texas can improve its status, including by efforts to increase its reserve margins.

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Dynamite Ending - Political Cartoon

Once considered the premier gambling destination in New Jersey's Atlantic City, the Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino soon cratered and went bankrupt, with former US President Donald Trump cutting ties with the failing casino in 2009.

The former Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino was reduced to rubble in a matter of just 20 seconds by some 3,000 sticks of dynamite on Wednesday, ridding local residents of a view of an extremely dilapidated building that had become in such disrepair that chunks of it were peeling off.

The unceremonious event took place just after 9 a.m. local time, and prompted a round of cheers from locals who gathered to watch the building's downfall.

Jennifer Owen, who paid nearly \$600 for a front-row ticket to see the implosion, told [The New York Times](#) that the demolition marked the "end of a not-so-great era."

However, Owen was far from being alone in welcoming the event with open arms. In fact, hundreds of [netizens rejoiced](#) over the controlled demolition.

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Conservative Radio Personality Rush Limbaugh Dead at 70
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US President Donald Trump awarded Rush Limbaugh the Presidential Medal of Freedom on February 4, 2020, just a day after the right-wing political commentator and talk show host announced that he had been diagnosed with advanced lung cancer.

Limbaugh, the 70-year-old host of the nationally syndicated radio program "The Rush Limbaugh Show," died Wednesday morning at his home in Palm Beach, Florida, according to an announcement made by wife Kathryn Adams.

"Losing a loved one is terribly difficult, even more so when that loved one is larger than life," she said, as reported by [Fox News](#). "Rush will forever be the greatest of all time."

The late [radio host](#) delivered an emotional address to his listeners during his last broadcast of 2020, proclaiming that he did not expect to make it through the year.

"Because I have outlived the diagnosis, I've been able to receive and hear and process some of the most wonderful, nice things about me that I might not have ever heard had I not gotten sick," [he said](#). "How many people who pass away never hear the eulogies, never hear the thank-yous?"

In addition to being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2020, the 70-year-old radio host also interviewed three US president's on his show, which has been in national syndication for over 30 years.

Limbaugh and his program rose to national attention in the early 90s, when he was featured in TIME Magazine's "Radio: Big Mouths" cover story alongside polarizing radio personality Howard Stern. The story was quick to highlight his language and rhetoric, including his propensity to refer to certain feminists as "feminazis."

During his on-air career, Limbaugh has been accused of sexism, racism and bigotry due to controversial segments on his show, such as his 2007 broadcast of "Barack the Magic Negro," a song that lambasted then-Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama's biracial identity and claimed he was "black, but not authentically," which "makes guilty whites feel good."

More recently, Limbaugh made headlines for his continued support of Trump in the wake of the 2020 presidential election.

While the longtime conservative radio personality [initially questioned](#) Trump's past dealings with the Democrat Party, he was one of many media personalities who backed the former US president's baseless claims about widespread voter fraud.

Earlier this month, Limbaugh [claimed Trump](#) "represents an uprising of the people of this country against Washington, against the establishment, and it had been building for a long time,... since Perot in 1992.... Trump was just the first guy to come along and actually weaponize it."

He has also floated that the US may be headed toward secession following the results of the November election.

"I know that there's a sizable and growing sentiment for people who believe that's we're headed to, whether we want to get there or not, secession," [Limbaugh said](#) on his nationally syndicated program. "Now, I didn't advocate for it. I never would advocate for secession. I'm simply repeating what I have heard."

Shortly after the announcement of Limbaugh's death, Trump called in to Fox News Wednesday and recounted the "incredible night" in which he awarded the radio host with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

"It was something special, it was an incredible night."

President Trump reminisces about awarding Rush Limbaugh with the Medal of Honor at the 2020 State of the Union address. pic.twitter.com/fWiTwgkW7O

— Washington Examiner (@dcexaminer) [February 17, 2021](#)

"His fight was very, very courageous and he was very, very sick," Trump expressed. "He was fighting until the very end. He was a fighter."

"People, whether they loved him or not, they respected him," the former US president added.

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Video: Trump Warns 'People Are Furious' Over Election Results in First Interview Since Capitol Riot

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this week, former US President Donald Trump attacked Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell in a lengthy rebuke, claiming McConnell - a "dour, sullen, and unsmiling political hack" - "will never do what needs to be done, or what is right for our Country."

While speaking with Fox News hosts Harris Faulkner and Bill Hemmer about the passing of conservative radio personality [Rush Limbaugh](#) on Wednesday, Trump answered questions about the late radio personality's take on the 2020 US presidential election, once again insisting that he had "won" on November 3.

"Rush thought we won," the former US president said before claiming that he had held victory in the election.

"Mr. President, we probably have a hundred questions for you, but so many of them are not appropriate for this venue, so we'll keep it on this topic for now and we appreciate your time today," Hemmer said at one point in the interview. Trump responded in agreement.

"Many people are furious, you don't know how angry this country is," Trump said later in the phone call, which was his first interview since the deadly January 6 riot at the US Capitol building.

The former US president's comments come months after the historic voter turnout of nearly 160 million Americans in the 2020 US presidential election. [Biden received](#) 81.2 million votes, while Trump secured 74.2 million in the national popular vote.

A survey conducted by Washington, DC, think tank Pew Research in 2020 found that nine-in-ten supporters of Trump and Biden believed the election of the other candidate would bring "[lasting harm](#)" to the country.

Furthermore, 83% of registered voters polled by the think tank last year claimed it "[really matters](#)" who wins the presidency in 2020, versus any other point in the last two decades.

Alongside the clear political divide in the US, there also exists a fracture within the Republican Party, with many pro-Trump members of the GOP clashing with other conservatives.

Trump notably took aim at former political ally McConnell, claiming in a [Tuesday statement](#) that the Senate minority leader's "dedication to business as usual, status quo policies, together with his lack of political insight, wisdom, skill, and personality," is the reason why Republicans lost the majority in the Senate.

The statement was viewed as a response to McConnell proclaiming on the Senate Floor that "there is no question" Trump was "practically and morally responsible" for inciting the deadly January 6 riot. However, he voted later that day to acquit the former US president on the single impeachment charge of "incitement of insurrection."

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) attempted to come between the two Republican heavyweights, telling Fox News' Sean Hannity that he needs fellow members of the GOP to "realize that without President Trump, we're never going to get back in the majority."

"I know Trump can be a handful, but he is the most dominant figure in the Republican Party," he said to Hannity, reciting what he would tell McConnell following Trump's scathing statement.

"We don't have a snowball's chance in hell of taking back the majority without Donald Trump."

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'A Voice of Millions': Trump, Bush and Other Top Republicans Remember Rush Limbaugh
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Rush Limbaugh, aged 70-years old, died at his Palm Beach, Florida, home Wednesday morning - a little bit over a year after he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and announced his advanced lung cancer diagnosis.

Public statements and comments continue to emerge in the wake of Limbaugh's lung cancer battle [and passing](#), including eulogies from past US presidents and key GOP figures.

'Rush is Irreplaceable,' Trump Tells Fox News

"It was special and he was special," Trump said, recounting to Fox News the night he bestowed the highest civilian award of the US on Limbaugh.

The former US president revealed to the outlet via phone interview that he had spoken with the conservative radio host days before his passing. He also highlighted that Limbaugh spoke highly of his wife, Kathryn Adams, who announced the 70-year-old's passing on his nationally syndicated program "The Rush Limbaugh Show."

"Every time I spoke to him he would tell me how great she was. She took such great care," Trump gushed. "He was very brave. I mean, he - in theory - could have been gone four months ago."

Pence Remembers Limbaugh as 'Greatest Champion' of 'Conservative Values'

Former US Vice President Mike Pence, who [has referred](#) to himself as "Rush Limbaugh on decaf," also phoned into Fox News Wednesday, proclaiming "the country will never forget Rush Limbaugh."

"When I served in the House of Representatives, he was our greatest champion when we were fighting a rearguard action for conservative values in Republican and Democrat administrations," Pence said of Limbaugh. "When I was governor of Indiana and when I served as vice president, he was the anchor of conservatism."

Pence, who hosted "The Mike Pence Show," an Indiana syndicated radio show that ran from 1994 to 1999, [tweeted](#) that Limbaugh was his "daily inspiration and the gold standard on the airwaves as he sat behind the golden EIB microphone."

"During my years among House Conservatives in Congress, he was our greatest champion," Pence added.

Pence's comments triggered the resurfacing of an October 2001 C-SPAN clip showing then-Rep. Pence crediting Limbaugh with jump-starting his political career.

"In many ways, the Republican majority owes much of its continued success to the talk radio that Rush Limbaugh reinvented in the mid-1980s as a format for conversation among millions of Americans on a daily basis," Pence remarked on the US House of Representatives floor.

"But it is a literal truth, Mr. Speaker, to say that I am in Congress today because of Rush Limbaugh," he argued.

Bush: Limbaugh Was 'a Voice of Millions of Americans'

Former US President George W. [Bush wrote](#) that he and his wife, Laura Bush, were "sorry to learn that Rush Limbaugh has passed away."

"A son of Cape Girardeau, Missouri, Rush rose as a pioneer of talk radio starting in the 1980s, and was a friend throughout my Presidency," Bush expressed in his Wednesday statement.

"While he was brash, at times controversial, and always opinionated, he spoke his mind as a voice for millions of Americans and approached each day with gusto."

Bush notably called in to "The Rush Limbaugh Show" in 2008 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the program.

"President George W. Bush calling to congratulate you on 20 years of important and excellent broadcasting," he said, leaving Limbaugh seemingly speechless. "I'm here with a room full of admirers, there's two others ... people who consider you friends."

"As he battled hearing loss and cancer late in life, he was sustained by the support of friends and family, his love of sports and rock and roll, and his belief in God and country. Rush Limbaugh was an indomitable spirit with a big heart and he will be missed." Bush's statement concluded.

Other Republicans, like native Missourian Sen. Josh Hawley and US Representative for Arizona Paul Gosar" also remembered the conservative radio host.

"He changed talk radio, but more importantly, Rush changed the conversation to speak up for the forgotten, and challenge the establishment," [Hawley said](#) Wednesday. "He lived the First Amendment and told hard truths that made the elite uncomfortable, but made sure working men and women had a seat at the table."

US President Joe Biden, a Democrat, also offered his condolences from the other side of the political aisle.

"His condolences go out to the family and friends of Rush Limbaugh," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters Wednesday. She also noted that it was unclear if the White House will release a separate statement on the conservative radio host's passing.

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Texas Halts Natural Gas Exports Until February 21 - Governor

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The state of Texas will halt natural gas exports until February 21 due to the severe winter weather, Governor Greg Abbott said in a press briefing. "Some natural gas produced in Texas is currently being shipped to locations outside of the state," Abbott said on Wednesday. "I have earlier today issued an order effective today through February 21 requiring those producers that have been shipping to locations outside of Texas to instead sell that natural gas to Texas power generators."

Abbott said that decision will increase the state's ability to restore power to more homes.

The severe winter weather is moving out of Texas, however, freezing temperatures will remain in most of the state until at least Saturday, Abbott said.

Moreover, Abbott said power was restored to about 1.2 million homes as of Wednesday morning.

More than 2.3 million homes in Texas continue to have no power due to the frigid temperatures.

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US Regulator to Decide if More Transparency Needed on Short-Selling - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) is mulling whether more transparency is needed in "short-selling," or the sale of stock an investor expects will decline in value in the future, after last month's developments involving videogame retailer GameStop, the Wall Street Journal reported.

The SEC had an opportunity 11 years ago to impose rules against short-selling but it did not do so. Now, dealing with the fallout that caused shares of GameStop to increase 1,600 percent last month before plunging, the regulator is reconsidering making that practice more transparent, the report said on Wednesday.

Lawmakers in the US House of Representatives, who will be meeting Thursday to examine the GameStop saga, plan to discuss the dearth of short-sale data, according to a memorandum issued in advance of the hearing and cited by the report.

The memorandum noted that the SEC had not completed its responsibilities under the Dodd-Frank mandate from 11 years ago that ordered firms to heighten scrutiny over short-selling.

The 2010 Dodd Frank financial overhaul law, triggered by the 2008 financial crisis, required the SEC to collect information about how much of each public company's stock has been sold short. The SEC now must piece together data from brokerages to understand which asset managers were most vulnerable to the GameStop short squeeze, which accelerated as many smaller traders gathering on the Reddit platform and urged one another to buy the shares.

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US Treasury Chief, Saudi Counterpart Discuss Global Economic Recovery From COVID

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in a telephone call with Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed al Jadaan discussed efforts to support a global economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, the Treasury Department said in a press release.

"She emphasized the need to address the daunting challenges of ending the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting the global economic recovery, fighting income inequality, and forcefully addressing the threat of climate change," the Treasury said in the release on Wednesday. Yellen and the Saudi Finance Minister highlighted the importance of the US-Saudi relationship, the release said.

She also underscored the importance of collaborating with multilateral institutions such as the G20, according to the release.

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Slim Majority of Americans Expect COVID-19 Disruption Well Into 2021 - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - A 53 percent majority of Americans expect disruptions due to the coronavirus pandemic measures to persist through the first half of next year, an increase from 33 percent who said the same in late December, a new Gallup poll revealed. Nevertheless, Americans have grown increasingly optimistic about the overall trajectory of the disease, a Gallup press release explaining the poll said on Wednesday.

"At the same time that more Americans predict the disruption due to COVID-19 will last longer, their perception of the current trajectory of the crisis has improved. The percentage saying the coronavirus situation is getting worse has dropped from 63 percent to 39 percent. Meanwhile, the percentages saying it is improving or is staying the same have both increased," the release said.

Optimism about the COVID-19 situation is up among all key demographic groups. One of the largest increases is among Democrats, with 34 percent saying the situation is getting better, compared with 9 percent who said the same in late December.

At the same time, the percentage of independents seeing improvement rose from 17 percent to 30 percent, while Republicans' views stayed about the same at just over 30 percent.

Gallup attributed expectations that the pandemic will last longer than anticipated to the US government's slow and disorganized rollout of vaccines as details emerged of new and potentially more contagious variants of the coronavirus.

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Biden Discusses With Netanyahu Continuing US-Israel Cooperation on Iran - White House

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden discussed in a telephone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the need to continue close cooperation on Iran and strengthening bilateral defense relations, the White House said in a press release.

"Together, the leaders discussed the importance of continued close consultation on regional security issues, including Iran," the release said on Wednesday.

Biden also affirmed his commitment to Israel's security and intent to strengthen bilateral relations, including in the area of defense cooperation, the release said.

Moreover, Biden expressed support for the Trump-era Abraham peace accords, but also emphasized the need to work to advance peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, the release added.

Both leaders are mutually interested in maintaining strategic cooperation to confront many existing challenges in the Middle East, according to the release.

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Trump Pays Tribute to Radio Talk Show Host Rush Limbaugh - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump praised conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh as being a great patriot, defender of liberty and a friend to millions of Americans after Limbaugh's wife announced earlier that he had lost his battle with cancer.

"The great Rush Limbaugh has passed away to a better place, free from physical pain and hostility. Rush was a patriot, a defender of Liberty and someone who believed in all the greatness our country stands for," Trump said in a statement on Wednesday. "Rush was a friend to myself and millions of Americans. He will be missed greatly."

Trump awarded Limbaugh the Presidential Medal of Freedom on February 4, 2020, just a day after the host of the nationally syndicated radio program "The Rush Limbaugh Show," announced that he had been diagnosed with advanced lung cancer.

For more than 30 years, Limbaugh was the most popular conservative radio personality in the United States with a loyal following estimated at around 15 million people.

Limbaugh died on Wednesday morning at his home in Palm Beach, Florida, at the age of 70.

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US Rights Groups Demand Biden Administration Halt Use of Facial Recognition Technology

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - A coalition of more than 40 civil rights and other advocacy groups called on President Joe Biden to halt all US government use of facial recognition technology (FRT) in a letter released by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). "FRT is already responsible for multiple false arrests and mistaken incarcerations of Black men. It disproportionately misidentifies and misclassifies people of color, trans people, women, and other marginalized groups, causing harm in our schools, homes, and communities, and it threatens our core constitutional freedoms including freedom of association and speech, due process protections, and privacy rights," the letter addressed to Biden said on Wednesday. The coalition included the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, which represents nearly all US civil rights groups, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Amnesty International and others, the ACLU said in an accompanying press release.

The letter cited multiple studies demonstrating that the technology does not work on minorities, especially Blacks. A 2018 experiment at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology showed Black women misidentified 35 percent of the time, while the identification of white men was nearly always accurate.

"In keeping with President Biden's commitment to racial equity, he must immediately take this important first step" by halting use of the technology by federal agencies," ACLU Senior Legislative Counsel Kate Ruane said in the release.

Multiple jurisdictions have banned police use of facial recognition technology including the cities of San Francisco, Boston and New Orleans, as well as the entire state of Vermont. In addition, New York State has suspended use of facial recognition in schools and California with police-worn body cameras, according to the ACLU.

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Biden Says He Has 'Good Conversation' With Israel's Netanyahu

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said he spoke over the telephone with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and characterized the conversation as being "good."

"Good conversation," Biden told reporters, but did not provide any details as to the topics he discussed with Netanyahu.

The Office of Israel's Prime Minister issued a statement saying the two officials discussed cooperation in various areas as well as regional issues.

"The conversation was very warm and friendly and continued for approximately one hour. The two leaders noted their longstanding personal connection and said that they would work together to continue strengthening the steadfast alliance between Israel and the United States," the office said via Twitter.

Biden and Netanyahu also discussed the future advancement of the recently concluded peace accords and the threat Iran poses, it added.

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Seven People Shot Near Train Station in Philadelphia - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - A gunman shot seven people near a SEPTA train station in the US city of Philadelphia, ABC News reported citing police. One person is in custody and two weapons were recovered from the incident, the report said on Wednesday. One of the victims is in critical condition, it added. Police are working on identifying the suspect and reviewing surveillance footage in the area of the shooting, the report said.

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Japanese CEO, Staff Charged in Pollution Plot to Defraud US Navy - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The head of a Yokohama company faces charges of seeking to defraud the US Navy and pollute Japanese sea areas by dumping contaminated water in the ocean, the Department of Justice said in a press release.

"Three Japanese nationals, including the president and chief executive officer of Yokohama, Japan-based Kanto Kosan Company were indicted by a federal grand jury Tuesday in connection with an alleged ... scheme to defraud the US Navy and pollute Japanese waters by dumping contaminated water removed from US Navy ships into the ocean," the release said on Wednesday.

The Justice Department said explained that Sojiro Imahashi, president and CEO of Kanto Kosan and staff members Tsuyoshi Ifuku and Yuki Yamamiya were charged with one count of conspiracy of making false claims, committing ocean dumping and carrying out major fraud against the United States.

"The defendants deceived the US Navy by willfully failing to satisfy the company's obligations under \$120 million in contracts with the Department of Defense that were designed, among other things, to ensure the company ...complied with critical environmental safeguards," Acting Assistant Attorney General Nicholas McQuaid said.

The indictment alleges that in approximately 2007, the defendants and others decided that, instead of properly treating the contaminated water, Kosan would minimally treat it to remove visible contaminants and then discharge the improperly treated or untreated residue into the ocean, the release said.

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US Approves \$91M In Sale of Long-Range Rocket Launch Systems to Finland - Defense Agency

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The State Department signed off on a proposed sale of extended-range multiple launch rocket systems to Finland in a deal valued at \$91.2 million, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said Wednesday.

"The Government of Finland has requested to buy twenty-five (25) M30A2 Extended Range Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems - Alternative Warhead (ER GMLRS-AW) Pods; and ten (10) M31A2 Extended Range Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems - Unitary (ER GMLRS-U) Pods," DSCA said in a press release. "The total estimated cost is \$91.2 million."

Finland intends to use the items to modernize its armed forces and enhance its military interoperability with the US and NATO partners, the release said.

DSCA added that it notified Congress of the potential sale, as required by law.

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G7 Will Discuss Keeping China Accountable During Upcoming Meeting on Thursday - Trudeau

TORONTO, February 17 (Sputnik) - The issue of holding China accountable will be a topic of discussion during the virtual meeting of the G7 leaders scheduled for Thursday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.

"We continue to work with partners around the world on holding China to account and improving opportunities for our business across the country and around the world. These are things we will continue to work on, including tomorrow in our virtual G7 meeting," Trudeau said during the question period session on Wednesday.

Trudeau defended Canada's membership in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, saying that allied nations, including Australia, France and Germany likewise are G7 members, after being grilled by Conservative Party leader Erin O'Toole for being "soft" on China.

Sino-Canadian relations soured after the Canadian authorities detained Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States. China is alleged to have responded by arresting two Canadian nationals on charges of espionage. The tense relationship has been further exacerbated by Canada's condemnation of the Chinese law on national security in Hong Kong.

Chinese officials have said Ottawa's deference to US foreign policy served as a catalyst for the growing diplomatic rift between Canada and China.

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Freezing Texans Hit With 'Mind Blowing' Power Bills Amid Outages

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Millions of Texans in the largest US energy producing state are left without electricity after the worst snowstorm to hit the typically sweltering state, and those who still have power have to pay thousands of dollars after their utility bills skyrocketed.

"While we value our members, we want what is best for their wallet and family even more, even if that means helping them switch away to our competitors," Griddy, a wholesale power provider in Texas, said in an advisory on its website Wednesday after one of the company's customers publicly shared his power bill for February that came in at more than \$5,000.

At least 3.1 million homes in Texas did not have power as of Wednesday morning after the worst snowstorm in 30 years left the state - which typically has temperatures of 60°F (15.6°C) to 70°F (21.1°C) - in below-freezing degrees.

Texas is the largest oil and natural gas producer in the United States, making the power outage even more perplexing.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott in a statement said he has ordered an investigation into the state's power grid — the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, or ERCOT — which he described as "anything but reliable over the past 48 hours".

US media, meanwhile, played up stories about Texans left numb not just by the cold but also their latest power bills, as a result of publicly-traded prices of electricity in the region that jumped as much 10,000 percent after the outage.

Royce Pierce, a 38-year-old contractor, is one Griddy customer who received a notice from the company advising him to switch to another utility if he thought he could get better rates.

"It's mind-blowing. I honestly didn't believe the price at first," Royce Pierce, a 38-year-old contractor, told the Daily Beast news portal as he revealed his \$5,152.06 bill for February. "It's not a great feeling knowing that there is a looming bill that we just can't afford."

Pierce said his bill for his two-story house last month was \$387.70. Last February, he only paid \$330.

Griddy said due to freezing temperatures, the ERCOT electricity market was currently experiencing extremely high pricing – and outages – due to increased heating demand and ERCOT energy production failures.

"New data is showing a good part of this week is likely to be even worse," the company added in the advisory posted on its website.

Griddy reminded its customers that it did not control the wholesale price of electricity and its role is to "simply pass through the cost of wholesale electricity to our customers and only make money from our \$9.99/month membership rate, no matter the price of electricity that we pass through from ERCOT".

It added that it expected elevated pricing to persist into the weekend, "likely not at the extreme levels of the last 2 and next 2 days, but still pretty unpleasant".

The White House said on Wednesday it has asked the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide generators, blankets and water to residents in Texas and other states impacted by the storm, and was working to quickly process requests for more assistance.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik)

US, NATO RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

- * NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept requires an update because it does not take into account the rise of China and the deterioration of relations with Russia, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said after the first day of the alliance's Defense Ministers conference on Wednesday.
- * The US government continues to consider Russia as likely being responsible for conducting the massive cyber attack against the company SolarWinds, Deputy National Security Adviser for cyber and emerging technology Anne Neuberger told reporters on Wednesday.

SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS

- * Moscow hopes that the new Biden administration will soften the US policy on Syria carried by the previous Trump administration, Russia's Special Presidential Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentyev said on Wednesday.
- * Russia sees the Syrian opposition forces' willingness to compromise and is, therefore, ready to have meetings in Moscow, Lavrentyev said.
- * Lavrentyev expressed the belief that the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham terrorist organization (banned in Russia) should not be reclassified as moderate opposition, and also pointed to the need to continue the resolute fight against terror groups.
- * Ahmad Tomah, the head of the delegation of the Syrian opposition at the Astana-format talks, praised the meeting with UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen as constructive, adding that the negotiations centered around the work of the Syrian Constitutional Committee.
- * The delegation of the Syrian government prioritized the return of refugees and abducted persons at the Astana-format talks in Russia's Sochi, the head of the delegation, Syria's Assistant Foreign Minister Ayman Sousan said.

NEW ITALIAN GOVERNMENT

- * The new Italian government will be pro-European and Atlanticist in its foreign policy, Prime Minister Mario Draghi said Wednesday.
- * The new Italian government will strengthen the recovery program with a special focus on renewable energy, Draghi said.
- * The new Italian government should launch a wide reform of the healthcare system, Draghi said.

NAVALNY CASE

- * The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) is demanding an immediate release of Alexey Navalny, whose suspended sentence in the Yves Rocher case was replaced with a prison sentence, his lawyer Olga Mikhailova told Sputnik.
- * The ECHR demand of the ECHR to release Navalny is a priori impracticable, Russian Justice Minister Konstantin Chuychenko said.
- * ECHR's demand is an element in the campaign of pressure on Russia, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

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Austin to Discuss Missions in Iraq, Afghanistan With NATO Counterparts - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will address the current missions in Iraq and Afghanistan with the defense ministers of NATO member states, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said in a briefing on Wednesday.

"He [Austin] looks forward to tomorrow's session as well where the allies will be discussing the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq," Kirby said.

The new Biden administration has not yet decided on the US military postures in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

Austin said earlier in the month that the Defense Department will conduct a global review of the US military force posture. He stressed that Washington will consult with allies and partners as it conduct the review.

On January 15, the Defense Department said it fully carried out former President Donald Trump's order to draw down troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now has just 2,500 soldiers stationed in each country. President Joe Biden has said he intended to reverse Trump's policies.

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US Policy Review on North Korea Factors in Significant Cyberthreats - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The US administration sees a significant threat of North Korea's malicious cyberactivities and takes it into consideration while performing a comprehensive review of its policies to the country, the State Department's spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

Price declined specific comments on newly revealed charges against three suspected North Korean hackers, who allegedly conducted cyberattacks around the world to steal \$1.3 billion from banks and businesses.

"Our review of our policy to North Korea will take into account the totality of the malign activities and threats that are emanating North Korea. Of course, most frequently we speak of North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile program. But of course, its malicious cyberactivity is something we are carefully evaluating and looking at as well," Price said during a daily briefing.

"I would say that in general North Korea's malicious cyberactivities threaten the United States, they threaten our allies and partners in other countries around the world. We know from previous cases... that North Korea poses a significant cyberthreat to financial institutions, it remains a cyberespionage threat, it retains the ability to conduct disruptive cyberattacks," he added.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US Justice Department announced charges against Jon Chang Hyok, Kim Il and Park Jin Hyok, members of a North Korean intelligence agency unit known as the Reconnaissance General Bureau. They are charged with one count of conspiracy to commit computer fraud and abuse and one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud, and if convicted face up to 35 years in prison.

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Martian Weather Looks Good For Thursday Landing of US Perseverance Rover – NASA

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Satellite images of the Jezero Crater on Mars, where the Perseverance Rover is slated to land Thursday afternoon show clear skies overhead even as storms rage elsewhere on the Red Planet, NASA scientist Ai Chen said in a news briefing on Wednesday.

"We just entered spring in the northern hemisphere which is actually the beginning of the Martian new year ... but the weather conditions look pretty favorable for us right now," Chen said. "There are some clouds that are out there and some polar cap ice storms but nothing near our Jezero landing sight."

Perseverance is due to complete its six-month journey to Mars with a perilous seven-minute final descent, when rocket thrusters on a platform holding the six-wheel rover need to slow a parachute-enabled descent from about 200 miles per hour to walking speed for touchdown. Chen described the final seven minutes as "the most critical and dangerous" part of the mission with no guarantee of success.

The landing is scheduled for 3:35 p.m. (8:35 p.m. GMT).

The mission will attempt to find signs of ancient microbial life near the bone-dry Jezero Crater, which formed a lake and river delta 3 billion years ago, NASA said.

The Rover will collect rock and soil samples to be cashed for a later mission, possibly with humans, that will return the samples to Earth, according to NASA.

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Blinken to Address Shared Challenges at E3 Group Meeting on Thursday - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday will participate in a virtual meeting with counterparts from the E3 group of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom to speak about shared challenges, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing.

"The Secretary will also participate tomorrow in a virtual meeting with his counterparts from France, Germany, and the United Kingdom - the so-called E3 - to discuss our shared local challenges," Price said on Wednesday.

Price said Iran's nuclear program and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action are expected to be among the issues discussed at the meeting.

The event this week will be a follow-up to the E3 engagement that took place in February.

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UPDATE - UN Chief, Child Relief Agency Call for Release of Students Kidnapped From Nigeria School

UNITED NATIONS, February 17 (Sputnik) - The UN Secretary-General's office and UNICEF on Wednesday condemned an attack on a school in northwest Nigeria and called for the immediate release of all students abducted during the .

Earlier in the day, a group of armed men wearing military uniforms attacked a college in the town of Kagara and took students and school staff to an unknown destination. According to the newspaper Nation, at least 42 people were kidnapped, including 27 students, three school staff and 12 family members. At least one of the students is suspected to have died during the attack and numerous others to have been wounded.

"We call for their immediate release," UN Secretary-General spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters at a briefing. "Attacks on schools on children are abhorrent and need to be condemned in the strongest terms."

UNICEF Nigeria Representative Peter Hawkins in a separate statement said the agency is deeply concerned about the violent attack on the college.

"UNICEF condemns in the strongest possible terms any attack on a school and calls for the immediate and unconditional release of any children who may be missing, and their safe return to their families," UNICEF Nigeria Representative Peter Hawkins said in a statement.

Similar attacks on schools and other facilities have become common for Nigeria, where groups of bandits regularly kidnap or kill civilians for ransom. The latest major attack occurred last December, when the Boko Haram terror group kidnapped more than 300 boys from a school in the north of Nigeria. Security personnel eventually managed to free the students and bring them home.

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Blinken, Quad Counterparts to Discuss 'Free and Open' Indo-Pacific Thursday - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his counterparts from Japan, Australia and India will discuss on Thursday cooperation to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific vision, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

"I am pleased to announce that tomorrow morning Secretary Blinken and his counterparts from Japan, Australia and India will speak together. The Quad as it is known. This discussion with the

Quad foreign ministers is critical to advancing our shared goals of free and open Indo-Pacific," Price said during a daily briefing Wednesday.

The Pentagon in a 2019 strategy document said the US military aimed to develop more "lethal" and innovative capabilities to counter China in the Indo-Pacific and ensure the region stays "free and open."

Blinken also said COVID-19 response and climate change are among the possible topics for the meeting.

The Indo-Pacific accounts for 60 percent of global GDP and includes nine of the ten busiest seaports in the world, according to the Pentagon.

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US Calls on Iran to Reverse Decision to Limit IAEA Inspections - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United States urged Iran to reverse the decision to limit inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"Iran should reverse these steps and refrain from taking others, that would impact the IAEA assurances, on which... the entire world relies," Price said.

On Monday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry reaffirmed Iran's intentions to limit the implementation of the Additional Protocol on inspections of its nuclear sites starting February 21. The ministry stressed that this would concern only additional inspections.

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US Earmarks \$200Mln to Track COVID-19 Mutations With Genomic Tests - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will provide \$200 million for a rapid expansion of genomic mapping of positive COVID-19 test samples to detect and track variants of the deadly coronavirus, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) said Wednesday.

"CDC [Centers for Disease Control] will invest nearly \$200 million to expand genomic sequencing capabilities, including bioinformatics, reporting, and modeling, to increase sequencing three-fold per week. This is integral to identifying new variants of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, and preventing and mitigating their spread," NIH said in a press release.

The effort will focus on increasing capacity of commercial laboratories, academic and research institutions and federal laboratories to sequence virus samples, the release said.

Mutated versions of the coronavirus have been detected in the United Kingdom, South Africa and Brazil, with scientists scrambling to determine vaccine effectiveness on each variation as well as the ease with which the variants spread.

For example, the UK variant is believed more contagious than the original coronavirus, even though it is not believed more deadly and also responds to existing vaccines. In contrast, some vaccines have been shown less effective against the South African variant.

NIH also earmarked \$650 million to create a network of "coordination hubs" tasked with expanding COVID-19 testing in schools and underserved facilities such as homeless shelters. Another \$815 million will be used to expand supplies of testing supplies such as filter pipette tips, materials needed for home tests, NIH said.

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US Emergency Agency Supplying Texas With Generators, Water Amid Winter Storm - White House

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is providing generators, blankets and water to residents in the US state of Texas as severe winter weather leaves millions without power, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"FEMA has supplied generators to Texas and is preparing to move diesel into the state to ensure the continued availability of backup power to keep critical infrastructure, including communications, hospitals, and water," Psaki said during a press briefing. "FEMA is also supplying Texas with water and blankets at their request."

Psaki said the White House and FEMA are monitoring the situation in Texas as well as in other states impacted by the winter storm.

The Biden administration is working to quickly process requests for assistance from other states, Psaki added.

More than 3.1 million homes in Texas do not have power as of Wednesday morning due to the frigid temperatures affecting the state's energy infrastructure.

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White House Says Bad Weather Slows Vaccinations in US

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - White House health officials admitted on Wednesday that inclement weather across the United States is causing delays in the coronavirus vaccination campaign and called for extra steps later to make up for the time lost.

"Yeah, the weather is having an impact on distribution and deliveries... People are working as hard as they can given the importance of getting the vaccines to the states and to providers," head of the White House COVID-19 Response Team Jeff Zients said during a briefing.

He added that in some areas including Texas, which is surviving historically low temperatures, vaccination sites "are understandably closed."

The US is encouraging governors and other partners to extend hours once they reopen," he added.

"We want to make sure that as we have lost some time in some states... our partners do all they can to make up that lost ground," Zients said.

Historically low temperatures were registered on Tuesday in 21 cities across the US including in the states of Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Texas. The deep freeze has battered the country's south and heartland since the start of the week, leaving more than 20 people killed.

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UN Calls for Immediate Release of Students Kidnapped From Nigeria School - Spokesman UNITED NATIONS, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is calling for the immediate release of all students who were abducted during the attack on a school in northwest Nigeria, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric during a press briefing on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, a group of armed men wearing military uniforms attacked a college in the town of Kagara and took students and school staff to an unknown destination. According to the newspaper Nation, at least 42 people were kidnapped, including 27 students, three school staff and 12 family members. At least one of the students is suspected to have died during the attack and numerous others to have been wounded.

"We call for their immediate release," Dujarric told reporters. "Attacks on schools on children are abhorrent and need to be condemned in the strongest terms."

Similar attacks on schools and other facilities have become common for Nigeria, where groups of bandits regularly kidnap or kill civilians for ransom. The latest major attack occurred last December, when the Boko Haram terror group kidnapped more than 300 boys from a school in the north of Nigeria. Security personnel eventually managed to free the students and bring them home.

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Canada, UK Call on Belarus to End 'Harassment' of Journalists, Rights Groups - Statement

TORONTO, February 17 (Sputnik) - Canada and the United Kingdom are calling on Belarus to end its alleged crackdown on journalists and civil rights groups, foreign ministers Marc Garneau and Dominic Raab said in a joint statement on Wednesday.

"Our governments jointly call on the Belarusian authorities to immediately cease their campaign of violence and harassment against journalists, human rights defenders and civil society actors," the statement said.

The foreign ministers added that Ottawa and London will continue to support the implementation of recommendations made by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's

(OSCE) Moscow Mechanism report. The report called for establishing an OSCE observation mission in Minsk and the release of individuals who have been unjustly detained. The Belarus opposition rejected the August election results showing President Alexander Lukashenko won another term in office and organized protests. Western countries have similarly not accepted the election results. Canada has imposed three rounds of targeted sanctions against 55 Belarusian officials whom it accuses of violating human rights. Lukashenko has repeatedly accused Western nations of direct interference in the internal affairs of Belarus. Russia has also voiced concerns over foreign interference in the neighboring country.

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White House Official Says Actor Responsible for SolarWinds Hack 'Likely of Russian Origin'

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The US government continues to consider Russia as likely being responsible for conducting the massive cyber attack against the company SolarWinds, Deputy National Security Adviser for cyber and emerging technology Anne Neuberger told reporters on Wednesday.

"An actor, likely of Russian origin, was responsible," Neuberger said during a press briefing at the White House.

The Biden administration is coordinating an interagency response to the cyber attack as the investigation into the scope and scale of the hack continues, she added.

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Number of Coronavirus Cases, Hospitalizations Decline in US - CDC Director

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is seeing a steady decline in coronavirus cases and hospitalizations with a death rate almost steady and new variants of the virus that are jeopardizing the progress, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said during a briefing at White House on Wednesday.

Walensky reported that the number new coronavirus cases and hospital admissions have been decreasing since January to reach 86,000 and 7,700 per day, respectively. Over the past, week both seven-day averages decreased by more than 20 percent.

"While cases and hospitalizations continue to move in the right direction, we remain in the midst of a very serious pandemic and we continue to have more cases than we did even during last summer's peak. And a continued spread of variants that are more transmissible could jeopardize the progress we have made in the last month," Walensky said.

The latest CDC data indicate that deaths decline by 0.6 percent to an average of 3.076 per day from February 9 to February 15.

Walensky estimated that the total number of coronavirus-related deaths may grow between 515,000 and 540,000 by March 6 from the current 488,352 deaths.

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UN Organizes First Humanitarian Flight to Southern Guinea to Respond to Ebola - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 17 (Sputnik) - The UN Humanitarian Air Service organized the first flight with medical equipment into N'Zerekore in southern Guinea, where a new Ebola outbreak had occurred, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"Less than 24 hours after the official declaration of the epidemic, the UN Humanitarian Air Service with logistical support from the World Food Program, organized the first humanitarian flight to the area," Dujarric said. "It carried personal protective equipment for healthcare personnel, assistance kit for infected people and disinfection equipment."

Dujarric said that the United Nations also deployed to the region a four-day mission with representatives of the World Health Organization, World Food Program and the UN Refugee Agency.

The delegation had already met with local officials and participated in a meeting organized by national authorities to establish a rapid contact-tracing mechanism.

On Sunday, Guinea's health authorities reported an outbreak of Ebola in the Goueke sub-prefecture, located about 45 kilometers (28 miles) from Nzerekore, the country's second-largest city. This is the first time since 2016 that Ebola has been detected in the country.

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Russia, China Should Take Action to Disrupt North Korean Hackers - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Attorney General John Demers said on Wednesday that Russia and China should take action to disrupt North Korean cyber attacks in the same way that the United States has done.

"Just as the United States has disrupted the DPRK's [North Korea's] crime spree through arrests, forfeitures and seizures, the time is ripe for Russia and China, as well as any other country whose entities or nationals play a role in the DPRK revenue-generation efforts, to take action," Demers said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Justice Department announced charges against three North Korean hackers that allegedly conducted cyberattacks around the world to steal \$1.3 billion from banks and businesses.

The three North Korean hackers Jon Chang Hyok, Kim Il and Park Jin Hyok are members of a North Korean intelligence agency unit known as the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB), the Justice Department said, adding that they were sometimes stationed in Russia and China. Jon, Kim and Park are charged with one count of conspiracy to commit computer fraud and abuse and one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud, and if convicted face up to 35 years in prison.

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UK Can Offer US New Partnership to Advance Tech, Cyber Capabilities - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The tradition of looser regulatory regimes in the United States and the United Kingdom than those in the European Union offer prospects for a new special relationship between the two countries to advance cyber, digital and other technologies, UK Ambassador in Washington Karen Pierce said on Wednesday.

"The UK and the United States [enjoy] slightly more freedom and are more permissive," Pierce told a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace podcast. "You can apply that to technology to move the [US-UK] special relationship into these very new areas of digital and technology." Pierce noted the two countries had rapidly advanced nuclear technology through their close bilateral cooperation in the 1950s and added that the current emerging technologies offered similar opportunities.

"We stand on the threshold of doing the same. ...The world is changing. Big trade deals are not what they were. It is possible to get the MFA [Most Favored Nation Agreement] with the United States. We would like to get it. We would be ready to talk about these labor, environmental and digital aspects," Pierce said.

The United States and the United Kingdom have also shared common ground and similar approaches to advancing human rights and advocating policies to aggressively combat climate change in international affairs, Pierce added.

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US Charges 3 North Korean Hackers in \$1.3Bln Cyber Scheme - Justice Department

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has charged three North Korean hackers for allegedly orchestrating cyberattacks around the world to obtain \$1.3 billion from financial institutions and businesses, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"A federal indictment unsealed today charges three North Korean computer programmers with participating in a wide-ranging criminal conspiracy to conduct a series of destructive cyberattacks, to steal and extort more than \$1.3 billion of money and cryptocurrency from financial institutions and companies, to create and deploy multiple malicious cryptocurrency

applications, and to develop and fraudulently market a blockchain platform," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The three North Korean hackers Jon Chang Hyok, Kim Il, and Park Jin Hyok are members of a North Korean intelligence agency known as Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB), the release said, adding that they were sometimes stationed in Russia and China.

The hackers allegedly stole \$1.3 billion from banks in Vietnam, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Mexico, Malta, and Africa between 2015 to 2019, the release said.

The hackers are accused of engaging in ATM cash-out schemes, including the October 2018 theft of \$6.1 million from BankIslami Pakistan Limited, according to the release. The hackers also allegedly created the WannaCry 2.0 ransomware in May 2017, the Justice Department added.

They also allegedly developed malicious cryptocurrency applications from 2018 to 2020, such as Celas Trade Pro, WorldBit-Bot, iCryptoFx, Union Crypto Trader, Kupay Wallet, CoinGo Trade, Dorusio, CryptoNeuro Trader, and Ants2Whale – which would give the North Korean hackers access to the victims' computers, the release said.

The hackers allegedly stole \$75 million from a Slovenian cryptocurrency company in 2017, \$24.9 million from an Indonesian cryptocurrency company in 2018, and \$11.8 million from a financial services company in New York in 2020, according to the statement.

Moreover, between 2016 to 2020, the hackers allegedly launched spear-phishing campaigns targeting employees of US defense contractors, energy companies, aerospace companies, technology companies, the US Department of State, and the US Department of Defense.

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UPDATE: Russia Sent 20 Medical Missions in 15 Countries to Help Fight COVID-19 - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, February 17 (Sputnik) - Russia has sent 20 medical missions to more than a dozen countries as part of its efforts to assist in the fight against the novel coronavirus, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday.

"Russia has been extending in fighting the pandemic. We sent 20 medical missions into 15 countries," Nebenzia told a UN Security Council meeting on the availability of coronavirus vaccines in conflict settings.

Nebenzia pointed out that Russia has also supplied testing systems to 50 countries and provided thousands of medical equipment units and millions of personal protective equipment free of charge.

"We continue our contacts with the COVID-19 ACT acceleration initiative," he said.

Nebenzia emphasized that Russia remains open to cooperate with interested partners to increase access to vaccines, medication and personal protective equipment and stands ready for other kinds of international cooperation.

"We are open for cooperation with interested partners to increase access to vaccines, medications and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) by local manufacturing, and we also stand ready for other kinds of international interaction to jointly combat the pandemic," he said.

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Two-Thirds of US Voters Want Congress to Probe Official COVID-19 Reports - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Nearly two thirds US voters, including both Republicans and Democrats, want Congress to investigate the accuracy of official pronouncements from state and local officials on COVID-19, a new Rasmussen poll revealed on Wednesday.

The poll was prompted by accusations that New York Governor Andrew Cuomo concealed the number of nursing home deaths in his state, a press release explaining the poll said.

"While Americans are divided over many issues, support for a congressional investigation into official COVID-19 reports is strong across party lines. Seventy-four percent (74 percent) of GOP [Republican] voters support such an investigation, as do 60 percent of Democrats and 59 percent of voters not affiliated with either major party," the release said.

Earlier this week Cuomo admitted the state erred in claiming as recently as late January that nursing home deaths in his state totaled 8,500 compared with the revised toll of more than 15,000.

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US Charges 3 North Korean Hackers in \$1.3Bln Cyber Scheme - Justice Department

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US Retail Sales Up 5.3% in January After Last Trump Stimulus Check - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - US retail sales increased 5.3 percent during the month of January, Commerce Department data revealed on Wednesday.

The data shows consumers in the United States increased spending beyond the expectations of some economists by using their last COVID-19 stimulus check provided by the Trump administration.

"Advance estimates of US retail and food services sales for January 2021, adjusted for seasonal variation and holiday and trading-day differences, but not for price changes, were \$568.2 billion, an increase of 5.3 percent from the previous month," the Commerce Department's Bureau of the Census said in a statement.

Some economists surveyed by US media had anticipated a growth of 1.2 percent on the average for retail sales in January.

The Trump administration sent out \$600 checks to most Americans toward the end of December as part of the \$900 billion stimulus it managed to approve in Congress. Prior to sending those checks, most Americans received \$1,200 each from a \$2.2 trillion approved by Congress in March.

The Commerce Department data showed broad-based spending gains in January, with major categories of the economy showing increases on the month.

Electronics and appliances saw the biggest increase, up 14.7 percent for the month. Furniture and home furnishing stores were up 12 percent. Online spending at non-store retailers increased 11 percent. Food and drinks establishments, which suffered the worst during the coronavirus pandemic, saw a 6.9 percent increase.

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Russia Sent 20 Medical Missions in 15 Countries to Help Fight COVID-19 - Nebenzia

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Russia remains open to cooperate with interested partners to increase the access to vaccines, medication and personal protective equipment by local manufacturers and stands ready for other kinds of international cooperation to jointly combat the pandemic.

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US Lawmakers Request Biden Administration Briefing on Nord Stream 2 Pipeline - Letter

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Four US Congressmen on Wednesday sent a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken requesting a briefing on the status of the Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline and an implementation plan for sanctions to prevent the gas-exporting project from being completed.

"We stand at the ready to work with you to counter Russian malign influence, including by ensuring the Nord Stream 2 is never completed as intended by the congressionally mandated sanctions aimed at stopping the pipeline," Michael McCaul, Marcy Kaptur, Adam Kinzinger and Ruben Gallego wrote.

The lawmakers asked the requested briefing to the status of the Nord Stream 2 after reports that work on the pipeline resumed on February 7, 2021; the status of ongoing US consultations with allies and any proposals offered to the Biden administration that aim to "persuade it to forego or weaken the mandatory sanctions."

The project aims to complete laying a 745-mile-long twin pipeline that will carry up to 1.942 trillion cubic feet of gas per year from Russia to Germany, passing through the territorial waters or exclusive economic zones of both countries as well as Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The United States is spearheading efforts to halt Nord Stream 2, which is nearing completion despite the threat of imposing sanctions.

The Biden administration has characterized the project as a "bad idea" and vows to coordinate with European allies the enforcement of sanctions against it.

Earlier this week, the Handelsblatt reported that the United States offered Germany to devise a "stoppage mechanism" for Nord Stream 2 in the event of violations of human rights by Russia and to reinforce guarantees to Ukraine that it will remain a supplier of energy resources to the European Union.

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US Launches Study of Remdesivir as COVID-19 Treatment During Pregnancy - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - A study in the United States will examine the impact of the medication remdesivir as a COVID-19 treatment for pregnant and lactating women, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) said on Wednesday.

"The study, which will be conducted at 17 sites in the continental United States and Puerto Rico, aims to determine how pregnant women metabolize the drug and whether there are any potential side effects," NIH said in a press release

Remdesivir has not been approved for use during pregnancy, but physicians can still prescribe the drug for pregnant woman if they believe it will help.

"Pregnant women with COVID-19 are at high risk for hospitalization, for intensive care admission and for needing ventilator support," NIH's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Director Diana Bianchi said in the release.

The study will evaluate remdesivir's pharmacokinetics - how a drug is absorbed, moves through the body and is broken down and eliminated in pregnant women and nonpregnant women of childbearing potential who receive it as part of clinical care, the release said.

For women who received the drug within five days of delivery, samples from the plasma and umbilical cord will be analyzed for insight into remdesivir's pharmacokinetics in the placenta, and breast milk will also be tested for remdesivir among women who are lactating, the release added.

Researchers will also document potential side effects and adverse events that could occur with use of the drug, according to the release.

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India Offers 200,000 Coronavirus Vaccine Doses to All UN Peacekeepers - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, February 17 (Sputnik) - India is ready to provide 200,000 doses of the coronavirus vaccine to all United Nations peacekeeping personnel, Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar told a UN Security Council meeting on Wednesday.

"Keeping in mind the UN peacekeepers, who operate in such difficult circumstances, we would like to announce today a gift of 200,000 doses for them," Jaishankar said during a discussion on access to coronavirus vaccines in conflict zones.

The United Nations has more than 97,000 peacekeepers from over 120 countries serving in 12 active missions across the globe.

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COVID-19 Vaccinations for All Teachers Not Realistic Before Reopening US Schools - Fauci

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Prospects for vaccinating every teacher for the novel coronavirus before public schools reopen are unrealistic due to a limited supply of vaccines, National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci said in an interview on Wednesday.

"If you are going to say that every single teacher needs to be vaccinated before you get back to school, I believe quite frankly... that that's a non-workable situation," Fauci told CBS News. Fauci's remarks come amid a national outcry regarding reopening public schools, a process that has been hampered by objections from teachers' unions that have close ties to the Democratic Party.

Republicans on the other hand, advocate reopening schools, citing success of Catholic and other private schools in resuming classroom teaching months ago.

"You want to put a good effort to get as many [teachers vaccinated] as you can as quickly as you can, but you don't want to essentially have nobody in school until all the teachers get vaccinated," Fauci said.

Schools can be safely opened with widespread use of protective gear such as masks and other mitigation measures such as smaller classrooms, Fauci added.

When asked when the vaccine would be broadly available to the general public, Fauci said the target is July, and not April as once anticipated - due to delays in production of a third vaccine by Johnson & Johnson in addition to those from Pfizer and Moderna.

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US Seeks to Advance Creation of Financing Mechanism for Global Health Security - Blinken

UNITED NATIONS, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United States aims to advance the creation of a much needed financing mechanism for health security to make the world better prepared during outbreaks in the future than it was for the current coronavirus pandemic, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a UN Security Council meeting on Wednesday.

"We seek to advance the creation of a long-overdue sustainable financing mechanism for health security so we can live in the world more prepared for future outbreaks than it was for this pandemic," Blinken said.

The Secretary of State emphasized there is no time to waste to prevent future pandemics given the new Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Guinea. Blinken added the United States would seek to cooperate with allies to reform the UN World Health Organization (WHO) in order to create a warning system and respond more rapidly with testing, tracing and personal protective equipment.

The WHO declared the coronavirus outbreak a global health emergency in January of 2020, a month after the first case was reported in Wuhan, China, which, the agency claimed provided countries enough time to prepare.

However, the former administration of US President Donald Trump accused the WHO of providing false information about the coronavirus outbreak, reacting with delay and showing favoritism to China. Trump began the process of withdrawing the United States from the WHO in July. The new administration of President Joe Biden is now in reversing Trump's action and is providing the WHO with \$200 million to meet its assessed and current obligations.

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US to Pay Over \$200M in to WHO by End of February - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United States will meet its obligations toward the World Health Organization (WHO) by providing \$200 by the end of February, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"Today, I am pleased to confirm that by the end of the month United States intends to pay over \$200 million in assessed and current obligations to the WHO," Blinken said.

The Secretary of State explained the US government plans to provide significant financial support to the global vaccine initiative COVAX through the Gavi Vaccine Alliance and will work to strengthen other multilateral initiatives involved in the global COVID-19 response.

On July 8, 2020, the former Trump administration gave a formal notice about the United States withdrawal from the WHO.

Upon taking office on January 20, US president Joe Biden issued more than 40 executive orders in the first two weeks reversing key policies of former President Donald Trump. Among them were the decisions to rejoin the WHO and support its global vaccine initiative COVAX.

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UNICEF Calls for Global Ceasefire During Vaccine Delivery, Administration - Exec. Director

UNITED NATIONS, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is calling for a global ceasefire while coronavirus vaccines are delivered and administered, UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore said on Wednesday.

"We need a global ceasefire, at a minimum. We need your help to extend the call made in Resolution 2532 for a humanitarian pause for the duration of the vaccine delivery and administration," Fore said.

Fore urged all United Nations member states to join the call and ensure that everyone is included in the national vaccination plans.

In addition, Fore called for assistance to be provided to restart stalled immunization campaigns for other diseases.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has repeatedly said that all hostilities worldwide should cease in order to direct joint efforts toward combating the novel coronavirus pandemic.

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UN Chief Calls for Global Vaccination Plan, Urges G20 to Lead Effort

UNITED NATIONS, February 17 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on Wednesday for the creation of a global vaccination plan to ensure equal distribution of COVID-19 vaccines worldwide and urged the G20 to lead the effort.

"The world urgently needs a global vaccination plan to bring together all those with the required power, scientific expertise and production and financial capacities," Guterres said in a UN

Security Council meeting. "I believe the G20 is well placed to establish an emergency task force to prepare such a global vaccination plan and coordinate its implementation and financing."

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UN chief calls for global vaccination plan, urges G20 to lead the effort
Sputnik

RPT - US, Russia Could Reduce Strategic Arsenals by 1/3 in Future Deal - Ex-Official
WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The United States and Russia could reduce their strategic arsenals by one third and limit their hypersonic weapons as part of a future arms control deal, Howard Stoffer, a former US State Department senior foreign service officer and former UN director of counterterrorism, told Sputnik.

On February 3, the United States and Russia extended for five years the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which limits each country to 700 missiles, 1,550 warheads, and 800 launchers. It is the last remaining agreement that limits US and Russian nuclear arsenals.

"I think future negotiations will try to lower those limits," Stoffer, who is now an Associate Professor at the University of New Haven, said. "I think it might be possible to continue to try to find a way to make this more comprehensive in the future. I think the verification procedures probably won't have to be changed all that much but what will be necessary for next steps is maybe to see if it's possible to reduce [the arsenals] by 1/3. Both sides have informally talked about that."

The current verification system and inspection procedures, he added, are innovative and open, which gave both sides confidence there has been no cheating.

Stoffer said hypersonic weapons, which reduce warning time and create greater instability, should also be included in any new treaty.

He warned, however, that there is currently no way to verify the location of tactical nuclear weapons.

"You need to have on-site inspection to see if there's tactical nukes somewhere and some of them are so small that they can be easily hidden. I think the time will have to come when we'll be able to monitor the gamma rays that come out of these weapons... to tell if a weapon is deployed anywhere on the planet," he said. "When that's possible, then it might be possible to ban tactical nuclear weapons... but we are so many years away from that, that's not a practical goal to work towards."

Another issue that Moscow and Washington will have to address is offensive anti-ballistic missiles (ABMs), Stoffer said.

"Right now the truth is anti-ballistic missiles don't work that well," he said. "The United States has had some successful tests. The Israelis have developed what they call an Iron Dome system for short-range missiles, but frankly, nobody still has developed a truly effective comprehensive anti-ballistic missile system, and that was the whole purpose of the ABM Treaty."

He said the ABM treaty allowed both sides to maintain a strategic offensive capability, so neither would feel invulnerable and start a nuclear war.

Another problem, Stoffer added, was US deployments of long-range anti-ballistic missiles in parts of Europe to counter Iran. It may not be necessary if the US gets back into the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action which would limit Iran's ability to make a nuclear weapon, he explained.

Stoffer said the two countries should also address non-strategic nuclear weapons. He said it was a big mistake for the US to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and expressed hope that it may be brought back into force.

Stoffer said he hopes the number of warheads is reduced every five years so that by 2050 or 2060 nuclear weapons are no longer an existential threat.

"For all of these things to take place we need to have a much better relationship between the Russian Federation and the United States," he underscored.

Stoffer was not optimistic about China's willingness to join a future strategic arms control deal given it has 300 warheads and the US and Russia have 1,550 each. Stoffer said Chinese President Xi Jinping would probably ask, "Why should I join in this party?"

"The leaders can talk about a future regime when the numbers would come down so significantly that it would be possible to include the other three permanent members of the Security Council who happen to be nuclear Powers: Britain, France and China," Stoffer said.

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RPT - US Library of Congress Acquires Collection With Rare Kandinsky, Chagall, Goya Masterpieces

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The US Library of Congress recently acquired masterpieces by Russian artists such as Wassily Kandinsky as part of the Aramont Library of rare albums, collection curator Stephanie Stillo told Sputnik.

"There are several examples of Russian and Slavic painters that offered illustrations for experimental livres- d'artiste - books with original art by prominent artists - during the early to mid-20th century," Stillo said.

The collection also includes Marc Chagall's wood cut illustrations to his poetry "Poemes" published in Geneva in the late 1960s, along with Kandinsky's drypoint print for Rene Char's "Le Marteau Sans Maitre," she added.

The Aramont Library also holds several books released by influential Russian art publisher, Ilya Zdanevitch, as well as illustrations of Polish avant-guard painter Stefan Gierlowski for Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Une Femme Douce," published in Paris in 1927.

The most valuable masterpieces in the collection include prints composed by Spanish painter and graphic artist of the Baroque period Francisco Goya.

Goya's two most famous series, both in the Aramont Library, are "Los Caprichos" (1799), a visual critique of the hypocrisy and foolishness of the Spanish Royal Court, and "Los Desastres

de la Guerra" (1810–20), published posthumously in 1863, a graphic and disturbing expose about the horrors of the Peninsular War, Stillo said.

The Aramont collection was donated to the Library of Congress by a benefactor who decided to remain anonymous. The collection was in private hands for over 40 years and contains 1,700 books, according to the library.

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RPT: FEATURE - Texas Residents Share Stories of Withstanding Snow 'Armageddon'

EL PASO, February 17 (Sputnik) - An unforgiving winter storm sweeping through Texas has left numerous residents stranded in their homes without enough food and firewood to stay warm, while others even sleep in tents inside their houses to better conserve heat.

More than 4.1 million residents in Texas have no power as of Tuesday afternoon, according to poweroutage.us, which is a system tracking the power outages across the United States. Temperatures throughout Texas reached between zero to 32 degrees Fahrenheit overnight and remain below freezing temperatures through Tuesday afternoon.

Alfonso Lara of the Dallas-Fort Worth area in north Texas told Sputnik he's been without power since midnight on Monday.

"We're not really ready here in the DFW [Dallas-Fort Worth] area for this type of weather... it's like Armageddon because so many bad things are happening," Lara said from his apartment on Tuesday.

Lara said he does have food and bottled water for the week, but water pipes are frozen.

"So many people have been affected, so many of us are without power for more than a day. I think tonight might be the worst day out of all of these days. It's really scary to be at home checking the thermostat be dropping in temperature without being able to do anything," he said. Lara said he's been eating sandwiches to survive and has been starting fires with wood to heat water.

"I was able to boil water and also ate instant soup and a coffee but the wood won't last till the end of the week," Lara said.

Meanwhile, nearby grocery stores are empty after residents went into a panic to get supplies, Lara said.

"I guess a lot of people also did panic shopping and some of the grocery stores are like empty," Lara said. "It's also hard to find charcoal [to cook outside] and wood to start fires."

Jennifer Fidler of Texas capital city Austin told Sputnik her apartment building has been without power since early Monday morning, adding that her neighbors have helped her get through the freezing temperatures a bit.

"I've been in double sweats, sweatshirts and in multiple blankets," Fidler said Tuesday. "I have this neighbor who heard my cry for a flashlight so he put [supply bag] together for me and I walked again in the deep snow to another building for that. I'm super hungry. We have electric stoves so we can't even heat water."

Fidler said many residents in her area have been walking around looking for food.

"I couldn't really sleep cause my dog was shivering under all our blankets and I felt bad but we just stayed wrapped up," Fidler said. "It's not like I could do much while hiding in my covers so I had been on my phone trying not to lose my sanity."

Austin Mayor Steve Adler said on Tuesday that hundreds of thousands of residents in Austin are still without power.

Andrew Lopez of the city of Houston told Sputnik he has been without power and running water for about 32 hours. However, he immediately prepared for the worst when he heard the weather warnings

"I thought ahead and filled every pitcher and water bottle I owned prior to Monday morning," Lopez said on Tuesday. "To combat the cold I pitched my backpacking tent inside the house and that's where the dogs and I sleep as it traps our body heat in such a small area - added some blankets on top for extra insulation."

Lopez said the current weather in the US gulf coast is "super unusual. Never had a snow here." "The no electricity thing is really throwing a wrench in all our plans but it's like a hurricane - you prepare and you wait it out," Lopez said. "Instead of dealing with wild wind or rising water, it's just cold, so as long as I layer up and don't brave the streets, I should be good."

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said on Tuesday that 1.3 million residents in the Houston region are without power, most since Monday morning.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott said in a statement on Tuesday that the Texas power grid has not been compromised, however, machinery of some companies that generate power has been frozen, including natural gas and coal generators.

Electric Reliability Council of Texas [ERCOT], which manages the flow of electricity to more than 26 million Texas customers, said on Tuesday that it is working as fast as it can to restore power. "ERCOT is restoring load as fast as we can in a stable manner. Generating units across fuel types continue to struggle with frigid temperatures," the agency said, adding that power has been restored to several hundred thousand homes.

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RPT - Democrats' Failure to Remove Trump From Political Equation May Cost Them Majority in House

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump's acquittal in the Senate impeachment trial could harm Democrats in the midterm elections next year and lead to their losing the majority in the House of Representatives they currently hold, former Virginia State Senator Richard Black told Sputnik.

"Democrats' failure to remove former President Donald Trump from the political equation could be highly damaging during midterm congressional elections on November 8, 2022," Black said. "I anticipate that Democrats will lose their razor-thin majority in the House of Representatives and that there will be a Republican Speaker of the House afterwards. By 2022, Joe Biden will face a far more hostile Congress than today."

On Saturday, 57 US senators endorsed and 43 rejected a single Article of Impeachment accusing Trump of inciting the January 6 incident at the Capitol. The conviction required a two-thirds majority vote of at least 67 out of 100 Senators.

Black said Democrats are deeply depressed in the aftermath of their second failed impeachment drive against Trump.

"They had hoped that a senate conviction on a single charge of inciting an insurrection would put an end to the widespread belief that the presidential election was illicit. Roughly half of American voters suspect that the presidential election was rigged," Black said.

In a statement after his acquittal, Trump said the impeachment trial was another phase of the greatest witch hunt in the history of our country. Trump also criticized the Democrats saying their impeachment was a sad commentary that one political party in the United States "is given a free pass to denigrate the rule of law, defame law enforcement, cheer mobs, excuse rioters, and transform justice into a tool of political vengeance, and persecute, blacklist, cancel and suppress all people and viewpoints with whom or which they disagree."

Black said evidence that the 2020 election was fixed continues to surface despite efforts by internet giants like Facebook, Twitter and others to censor individuals who are exposing such proof of voter and election fraud.

"Democrats appear to have massively rigged the election. Despite this, the mainstream media consistently refer to claims of election fraud as 'unfounded' or 'lacking evidence.' It has become increasingly hard for them to maintain this facade, however, since hundreds of witnesses have signed sworn affidavits that they personally watched the election fraud taking place. Convincing scientific evidence has established, with near certainty, that the vote tallies were altered. This mountain of credible evidence has made it imperative for Democrats to destroy Trump and those who support him," he said.

Black note he believes that the Senate's refusal to convict Trump was a serious blow to the Democrats' plans to "legitimize the highly-questionable presidential election."

"There is growing dissatisfaction within the electorate over Democrat-inspired street violence, their contempt for morality, their release of violent criminals and illegal aliens, and their attempts to punish political enemies," he said.

In addition, Black said Democrats failed to convict Trump because they were unable to present "a single shred of evidence" that the former president was guilty of inciting an insurrection.

"Indeed, his speech to demonstrators urged them to act "peacefully," he said. "In that way, the trial resembled the first impeachment over the infamous Russia hoax. Before Trump was ever sworn in as president, Democrats at the highest levels of government conspired to use a dossier concocted by British MI-6 spy, Christopher Steele, to frame and impeach Donald Trump for working with Russia to rig the election. Despite a lengthy show trial, not one shred of evidence was presented to show that President Trump had done anything improper."

When asked whether the impeachment trial could affect Trump's chances to come back to power, Black said that nothing frightens his opponents more.

"Democrats had hoped that they could convict president Trump in the Senate. If they had done so, they would have conducted a second vote to bar him from ever holding public office," he said. "Since they we're unable to do so, they are desperately searching for another way to block his possible reelection."

Black pointed out that Democratic Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia even discussed the possibility of using the 14th Amendment of the Constitution to dispense with a trial and simply vote to declare Trump guilty and strip him of his right to ever run for office again.

However, Black stressed that a bill to declare a person guilty and prescribe his punishment without trial is a classic Bill of Attainder.

"Bills of Attainder are prohibited by Article I, Section 9, Clause 3, which states, 'No Bill of Attainder or ex post facto Law shall be passed,' he said. "Bills of Attainder are classic tools of tyrants. King Henry VIII, who slaughtered 57,000 Englishmen, used Bills of Attainder against many of his political opponents. The fact that Democrats would consider resorting to a Bill of Attainder demonstrates how deeply they fear Donald Trump and the 75 million Americans who cast their votes for him on election night."

Asked whether the current president will be able to unite the country, Black said, "Joe Biden has assumed office from an extraordinarily weak position. Many Americans do not believe that he was duly elected president, and his cabinet seems poised to adopt policies that are highly unpopular. There already appears to be growing dissatisfaction with the new administration, and that does not bode well for its future," Black concluded.

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RPT - US Can Reactivate Open Skies Treaty as Trump Withdrawal Illegal - Ex-State Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, February 17 (Sputnik) - The US government could revive the Open Skies Treaty as the previous Trump administration's withdrawal from the accord was illegal, a former US State Department senior Foreign Service Officer and former UN Director of Counterterrorism Howard Stoffer told Sputnik.

"I think open Skies we can we can you know reactivate open Skies very quickly... The Trump administration's announcement that it would withdraw from Open Skies is a violation of US law," Stoffer said.

Stoffer explained the law, dubbed National Defense authorization act for 2020, required the Trump administration to notify Congress 120 days ahead of submitting a notification of its intent to withdraw from the treaty.

"The Trump administration never did that. I don't think it even gave a notification until just a short while before when the whole world knew that the United States was going to pull out," Stoffer said.

The United States' participation in the Open Skies Treaty ended in November, six months after the former Trump administration announced its intention to withdraw from the accord.

Stoffer said current President Joe Biden should regard the United States' withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty as illegal and inappropriate, and Washington should observe the accord in the hope that Russia and the other parties to the treaty will accept the fact that the United States is back.

Moreover, Stoffer emphasized that the Open Skies Treaty is one of the urgent matters the United States and Russia should address, noting that it took many years for the agreement to be concluded.

"The Open Skies came out of the 1950s when both sides were known to be trying to observe the other and they couldn't," Stoffer said. "So, the idea was why don't we just allow planes to fly through our airspace and verify what's going on and Open Skies grew out of that. It took another two decades before Open Skies was agreed to in the 1970s. Lots of countries are now part of it in Europe, the United States, Canada, Russia."

Last week, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Russia would consider returning to the Open Skies Treaty if the United States reversed its decision to withdraw, but without any concessions.

Ryabkov also said Russia has kept fulfilling the Open Skies Treaty in good faith despite the launch of the withdrawal procedure and is ready to host observer missions.

On January 15, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced Moscow was initiating the procedures to leave the Open Skies Treaty over the disruption of balance of interests after the United States withdrew from the accord. However, Moscow said it would reverse the decision if the European treaty members agree not to share intelligence with the United States on its military infrastructure that was collected during flights as well as allow Russian flights over US military infrastructure located in Europe.

The Open Skies Treaty was signed in 1992 and went into effect ten years later. It allows 34 participating countries to conduct unarmed observation flights over each other's territories.