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#TedFled: Fury Erupts After Senator Cruz Spotted in Cancun as Texas Pounded by Winter Storm  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Many liberals were already demanding the resignation of US Sen. Ted Cruz after his support for former US President Donald Trump's failed effort to overturn the November 2020 election. Photos spread across social media on Thursday of Cruz, a Republican who represents the state of Texas, on a plane to a Mexican resort, as millions of his constituents are struggling to stay warm amid a days-long power outages.

Americans were already enraged enough that Congress went into recess earlier this week without passing the long-debated [COVID-19 relief bill](#), but their fury reached new heights when a pair of photos emerged late on Wednesday of the Texas senator in an airport terminal and on a plane to sunny Cancun, in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula.

Cruz's whereabouts were confirmed by several sources, including a tip to the [Associated Press](#). Cruz issued a statement Thursday afternoon in which he confirmed the reports, saying he made the flight "to be a good day" to his daughters, who went on travel due to schools being closed. Cruz was confirmed earlier on Thursday to have bought a business-class ticket back to Texas, having originally been scheduled to return on Saturday, contrary to the lawmaker's later claims. Back home in Texas, as many as [150,000 people were without](#) power on Thursday morning, down from some 4.4 million who lost electricity as a powerful snowstorm and cold snap rolled in from the north. In addition, some 7 million people remain under "boil water" advisories thanks to ruptured water lines and downed power lines. Texas authorities had promised [short-term "rolling" blackouts](#) to conserve power, since the state's electrical grid isn't connected to the rest of the US, but those became days' long outages as downtown areas remained well-lit.

In poorly insulated homes and deprived of power for days, millions now face hypothermia and other dangers as temperatures plunge below zero degrees Fahrenheit (negative 17.7 Celsius). [At least 37 people](#) have died so far from the storm, the majority of them in Texas.

Cruz is by no means the only unhelpful Texan lawmaker: Governor Greg Abbot has [attempted to blame](#) the power outages on the supposed vulnerabilities of wind turbines to cold, and Colorado City Mayor Tim Boyd [resigned after telling](#) his constituents that "Only the strong will survive and the weak will parish [sic]."

On Twitter, the hashtag #TedFled began trending, as constituents expressed their outrage that the lawmaker would abandon his people in a time of crisis.

One person noted that Beto O'Rourke, a former federal lawmaker from El Paso who launched a failed bid to win the 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary race, was doing more to directly help Texans in the crisis than Cruz, who is still in office. In [a Thursday post](#), O'Rourke described some of the community aid he had helped coordinate, including transporting elderly people to warming centers.

Others poked fun at the situation, including noting how the writers of the animated sitcom “The Simpsons” had managed to predict yet another situation years before it came about. Texas Democrats have now raised calls for the leading Republican senator to resign. Texas Democratic Party chairman Gilberto Hinojosa called Cruz’s trip “disturbing and disappointing,” saying that he was “jetting off to Mexico while Texans remain dying in the cold.” “The Texas Democratic Party calls on Ted Cruz to resign or be expelled from office,” Hinojosa said in [a Thursday statement](#). “Barring that, we will put all of the resources we have into defeating him and every Texas Republican who abandoned us in this disaster, including Governor Abbott and Lieutenant Governor Patrick, in 2022 and 2024. We are in a battle for the soul of our state. We must restore ethics, competence, and a government that works for the people.”

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Russia’s Su-57s Conducting Captive-Carry Tests of New Air-Launched Hypersonic Missile - Report  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Defense industry leaders have long indicated that Russia’s advanced fifth-generation Su-57 fighter, equaled by only a handful of other jets in the skies, will have several special weapons designed for it.

Russia’s stealthy Su-57 is reportedly undergoing tests on its ability to carry a new hypersonic weapon, according to sources inside Russia’s military-industrial complex.

Russian media reported earlier this week that a realistic mockup of a new “intra-fuselage hypersonic missile” was being carried by an Su-57 for test flights. The details of the weapon are vague; however, it is likely the [same weapon reported](#) to have been developed in February 2020.

The Su-57 has long been expected to one day carry the Kh-47M2 “Kinzhal” missile, an air-launched hypersonic weapon already deployed on the Russian Air Force’s MiG-31 long-range fighters that has a blistering top speed of Mach 10. The [Tu-160 supersonic bomber](#) is slated to receive a similar upgrade.

However, in order to be carried inside the Su-57’s 14-foot-long internal weapons bay, the missile would have to be much smaller than the Kinzhal, which is roughly 26 feet long. No extant hypersonic weapon has been so small, as all have been the size of large cruise missiles or [air-launched ballistic missiles](#).

Such a weapon might be powered by an [air-breathing scramjet](#), a type of advanced rocket engine used to attain ultra-fast speeds, such as that currently being developed by India.

Russia has also developed the [Avangard hypersonic glide](#) vehicle, which is launched by a large ground-based rocket, and is currently [testing the Zircon](#) hypersonic anti-ship missile, which will one day be carried by its missile cruisers.

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Saudi Coalition Sends Troops to Reinforce Yemen's Marib as Houthis Close in on Gov't Stronghold  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The United Arab Emirates has begun dismantling a key military base in Eritrea that it used to wage war against the Houthi movement as it withdraws from the six-year-long conflict. Despite a devastating air campaign, the Saudi-led coalition hasn't been able to stop the Houthi advance or its attacks into Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi-led coalition in Yemen has doubled down its defense of the central city of Marib, shuffling troops and equipment in from other parts of the country as Houthi forces close in on the city.

[Reuters reported Thursday](#), citing sources in the Yemeni government and military, that hundreds of fighters from eastern Yemen's Hadramaut and Shabwa Governorates had arrived in Marib, about 75 miles east of the Houthi-controlled capital of Sana'a, and that the Royal Saudi Air Force had intensified its airstrikes on Houthi positions.

Al-Masirah, a Houthi media outlet, [claimed on Thursday](#) that the government reinforcements included members of Daesh\* in their ranks. Local affiliates of Daesh and al-Qaeda\* have both [struggled for influence](#) in eastern Yemen since even before the war began in 2015, with some [Western-made weapons](#) sold to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, another coalition partner, being found in their hands.

[Al Jazeera reported](#) there have been hundreds killed on both sides since the offensive began earlier this month. Meanwhile, Houthi forces reportedly [succeeded in capturing](#) all of Marib Dam on Thursday, a strategic location about 7 miles south of the city with a commanding view over nearby highways.

Outside Powers Encourage De-escalation

On Monday, UN Undersecretary-general for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock said he was "very alarmed about the military escalation in Marib and its impact on the humanitarian situation."

"An assault on the city would put two million civilians at risk, with hundreds of thousands potentially forced to flee - with unimaginable humanitarian consequences," [Lowcock tweeted](#). "Now is the time to de-escalate, not to add even more to the misery of the Yemeni people."

US State Department spokesperson Ned Price [echoed Lowcock's comments](#), saying the Houthi offensive "is the action of a group not committed to peace or to ending the war afflicting the people of Yemen... This assault will only increase the number of internally displaced persons and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Yemen."

A Houthi spokesperson [told Iran's PressTV](#) on Wednesday that by capturing the city, they would be bringing a political solution to the conflict closer, although they vowed to continue fighting until the Saudi coalition lifts the "siege" of the country.

Eye of the Storm

For many years distant from the most intense fighting, Marib became a haven for those fleeing the conflict that had consumed the country's western regions. However, that changed when the Houthis mounted a [major offensive toward](#) the city in April of last year.

Though it is home to just 16,000 people, Marib is the last major stronghold of the official Yemeni government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. It is also home to a [major oil refinery](#) capable of producing 25,000 gallons of petroleum per day, transported along a pipeline to an offshore facility in the Red Sea.

Hadi's government is recognized by the United Nations and is part of the Saudi-led alliance against the Houthis, who seized power at the head of a mass uprising in 2014. The Houthis opposed a federalization plan that they said would increase rather than decrease poverty, and they attracted a mass backing after Hadi cut gas subsidies and other public programs, seizing control of the capital of Sana'a and forcing Hadi to flee the country.

#### A Devastating Conflict

The war against the Houthis has been particularly brutal, with the Saudi alliance in near-total domination of the skies and their airstrikes destroying hospitals, schools and port facilities. Saudi naval forces have also imposed a near-total blockade of the country, preventing food or medical supplies from entering and imperiling millions of Yemenis with hunger, cholera, and COVID-19. At least 100,000 people are believed to have been killed in the conflict, essentially all of them Yemeni, and the situation is widely regarded as the world's [worst humanitarian crisis](#). However, in recent years the Houthis have acquired [anti-aircraft weapons](#) and [ballistic missiles](#) capable of striking into Saudi territory, drawing allegations of Iranian proxy support that [Tehran has denied](#).

US President Joe Biden recently announced he was [ending US support](#) for the Saudi war effort, but did not preclude supporting other operations in the country, such as against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. He also [removed the Houthis](#) from the US' list of terrorist groups, a move outgoing US President Donald Trump made last month before he left office.

\*Daesh (also known as ISIS/ISIL/IS), al-Qaeda are terrorist organizations outlawed in Russia and many other states

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US Ready to Accept EU Invitation to Attend P5+1 Meeting With Iran, State Department Says by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A senior US official told Reuters Thursday the US was "ready to show up" if the European Union extended an invitation to host talks with Iran. Meanwhile, Washington has taken an important step toward undoing some moves against Tehran by the Trump administration.

"The United States would accept an invitation from the European Union High Representative to attend a meeting of the P5+1 and Iran to discuss a diplomatic way forward on Iran's nuclear program," US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said Thursday.

The P5+1 are the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council - the US, UK, France, China, and Russia - as well as Germany. The six nations, plus the European Union and

Iran, are together the parties that formed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. The deal saw the lowering of international sanctions against Iran in exchange for the country accepting strict limitations on the quality and quantity of uranium it could refine. Also on Thursday, Washington [informed the UNSC](#) it was rescinding a 2020 move by the prior Trump administration that attempted to trigger the so-called "snapback" sanctions against Iran. Nearly the entire Security Council refused to support Washington's move at the time, since the US had withdrawn from the agreement in 2018.

Earlier this month, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad [Zarif noted that EU](#) High Representative Josep Borrell could potentially "choreograph" a return to the JCPOA through his office's function in the agreement as the coordinator of the joint commission that monitors compliance.

The Trump administration pulled the US out of the deal unilaterally in 2018, claiming Iran had secretly been violating the deal's terms and was pursuing a nuclear weapon. The US reimposed its damaging sanctions, but no other nation joined them because they found no violation of the deal by Iran. However, Washington's move encouraged Tehran to begin backing away from its obligations under the deal, and in December the Iranian Majlis passed a law accelerating the process by increasing both the [purity and the volume](#) of uranium being refined.

Iran denies it is interested in developing a nuclear weapon, and the uranium so far has not been purified beyond 20% U-235, which is useful only for fueling nuclear power plants.

On February 21, the next step of the process begins as Iran will block any snap inspections by the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA). Other inspections will not be affected by the move, nor will any IAEA inspectors be expelled. The US, France, Germany and UK [called on Iran](#) on Thursday to "consider the consequences of such grave action, particularly at this time of renewed diplomatic opportunity."

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NATO to Increase Troops in Iraq From 500 to 4,000 Amid Daesh Resurgence, Stoltenberg Says by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In January 2020, the Iraqi Parliament voted to demand that US forces leave the country. Instead, Washington threatened to freeze the country's bank account at the US Federal Reserve, where billions of dollars in oil wealth are stored.

The head of the North Atlantic alliance announced on Thursday that the number of troops from NATO countries in Iraq would increase eightfold, from 500 to 4,000, ostensibly in an attempt to keep a lid on Daesh\*.

"Training activities will now include more Iraqi security institutions, and areas beyond Baghdad," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said at a [Thursday press conference](#), noting the increase was "to support the Iraqi forces as they fight terrorism and ensure that ISIS does not return."

"Our presence is conditions-based, and increases in troop numbers will be incremental," he said, adding, "Our mission is at the request of the Iraqi government. It is carried out with full

respect for Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity. I spoke with Prime Minister al-Kadhimi this week and assured him that everything will be done in full consultation with the Iraqi authorities." It's unclear how Stoltenberg's statement affects the 2,500 US troops already stationed in Iraq. A joint effort that included Iraq, Iran, and the US pushed Daesh out of Iraq in 2017. Its caliphate crumbled the following year in eastern Syria until the terrorist group controlled no more territory, becoming a mobile guerrilla force. However, the militia remains able to mount devastating attacks, such as the bombing of a Baghdad market last month that killed 32 people and injured more than 100.

In fact, Daesh has suffered serious losses in 2021, including the [group's deputy leader](#) and supposed "governor of Iraq," and the [Washington Post reported](#) recently that Iraqi forces had arrested 350 accused Daesh fighters in the past six months.

However, [a rocket attack](#) on a military base used by US forces in the northern city of Erbil on Monday killed at least 10 people, including a US military contractor and a US soldier. A Shiite militia named "Saraya Awliya al-Dam" claimed responsibility for the attack, but Washington has blamed Iran; Tehran has denied responsibility.

US forces have long been considered unwelcome in Iraq by a larger sector of the population, but after a US drone assassinated Iranian Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani outside Baghdad in January 2020, the Iraqi Parliament passed a resolution demanding that all US forces withdraw from the country - a suggestion [that was mocked](#) by then-US President Donald Trump.

In retaliation for the killing, Iran launched a [ballistic missile attack](#) on US troops at Ayn al-Asad air base in central Iraq. The attack damaged the base and injured hundreds of US troops, but none were killed in the bombardment.

Stoltenberg also mentioned NATO's mission in Afghanistan, from which the force is due to totally withdraw by May 1, according to an agreement signed with the Taliban militant group last year. He said the multinational force has "made no final decision on the future of our presence" in the Central Asian country, but would do so in the coming weeks.

The US invaded both countries in the early 2000s - Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 - in a [purported bid to chase](#) down international terrorist groups. While the US has remained in Afghanistan ever since, US troops left Iraq in 2011 after fighting a destructive and yearslong counterinsurgency war, and returned in 2014 amid the rise of Daesh, which eventually captured one-third of the country.

\*Daesh (also known as ISIS/ISIL/IS) is a terrorist organization outlawed in Russia and many other states

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Researchers Call for Second Pfizer Dose to Be Delayed as First Dose Highly Effective, Study Says

by [Mary F.](#)

On December 11, 2020, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued the first emergency use authorization for a COVID-19 vaccine produced by Pfizer and BioNTech. The vaccine shows efficacy of 85% at preventing COVID-19 infection after two doses.

The second dose of Pfizer Inc's COVID-19 vaccine should be delayed until all priority groups are immunized since the first dose is very protective against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, two Canada-based researchers, Danuta Skowronski and Gaston De Serres, said in a letter published in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#).

Based on an analysis of documents submitted by Pfizer to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the vaccine, known as BNT162b2, appeared to have an efficacy of 92.6% after the first dose.

"Even before the second dose, BNT162b2 was highly efficacious, with a vaccine efficacy of 92.6%, a finding similar to the first-dose efficacy of 92.1% reported for the mRNA-1273 vaccine (Moderna)," the report states, comparing the Pfizer's vaccine efficacy to that of Moderna. The Moderna vaccine, developed by the US biotechnology company of the same name, received emergency use FDA authorization in December.

Given the small increase in efficacy between the first and second dose, the researchers argued that "the benefits derived from a scarce supply of vaccine could be maximized by deferring second doses until all priority group members are offered at least one dose."

The authors admitted that even though there "may be uncertainty about the duration of protection with a single dose," the second dose just three weeks after the first dose "provides little added benefit in the short term, while high-risk persons who could have received a first dose with that vaccine supply are left completely unprotected."

In their letter, the researchers also explained that "postponement of the second dose is a matter of national security that, if ignored, will certainly result in thousands of Covid-19-related hospitalizations and deaths this winter in the United States — hospitalizations and deaths that would have been prevented with a first dose of vaccine."

The New England Journal of Medicine also published Pfizer's response to the letter, in which the pharmaceutical company noted that "alternative dosing regimens" have not been thoroughly studied.

"The decision to implement alternative dosing regimens resides with health authorities. However, we at Pfizer believe that it is critical for health authorities to conduct surveillance on implemented alternative dosing schedules to ensure that vaccines provide the maximum possible protection," Pfizer added in its response.

However, not all experts are in agreement on dosing regimens, with Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stating on NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday that he disagreed with delaying second doses.

"The amount of time that it will take, the amount of people you would have to put into the study — by that time, we will already be in the arena of having enough, of having enough vaccines to go around anyway," Fauci said, [The Hill reported](#).

"But what we have right now, and what we must go with, is the scientific data that we've accumulated, and it's really very solid," he added. "We know that with each of these it's either 21 days or 28 days. You can do both. You can get as many people in their first dose at the same time as adhering, within reason, to the timetable of the second dose."

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Robinhood CEO Admits That Company Did Not Respond Ideally to GameStop Short Squeeze by [Mary F.](#)

Wall Street short-sellers lost billions of dollars at the end of January after a viral online movement of amateur online traders started buying shares and stock options in the company, prompting GameStop's market value to surge exponentially.

During a House hearing Thursday, Robinhood CEO Vlad Tenev apologized at a House hearing for his company's decision to temporarily restrict stock purchases of GameStop and other shorted stocks, a decision that was met with significant backlash and the launch of investigations by [several congressional committees.](#)

"Look, I'm sorry for what happened. I apologize, and I'm not going to say that Robinhood did everything perfect ... Robinhood as an organization will learn from this, and improve, to make sure it doesn't happen again," [Tenev explained.](#)

In February, Tenev revealed that Robinhood restricted trading after facing pressure from the National Securities Clearing Corporation (NSCC), an organization that settles stock trades between brokers.

During an interview with Elon Musk at the time, Tenev explained that Robinhood is required to deposit money with the NSCC based on several factors, including volatility of trading activity. When GameStop's market value surged, Robinhood received a request from the NSCC for around \$3 billion deposit, a much larger than usual deposit. In response to the NSCC's deposit request, Robinhood temporarily blocked traders from buying GameStop shares, Tenev explained.

During the Thursday hearing, Tenev also reaffirmed previous statements that the company did not have liquidity problems, which some have cited as the rationale behind Robinhood's decision to restrict trading.

In addition, he [explained](#) that Robinhood raised more than \$3.4 billion in a few days to reinforce its balance sheet and reduce some of the restrictions.

"That additional capital ... was entirely to prepare for a future, even greater 'black swan event' and to unrestrict on the trading and buying of these securities. The \$3.4 billion we raised I think goes a long way in cushioning the firm for future market volatility and other similar 'black swan event.'"

"Black swan event" is a metaphor used to describe events that come as a surprise and have a major effect.

When asked if Robinhood was pressured by hedge funds to halt trading, Tenev responded: "We don't answer to hedge funds."

During the hearing, Tenev also faced questions from Rep. Emmanuel Cleaver, D.-Missouri, about the death of Alex Kearns, a 20-year-old Robinhood customer who committed suicide last year after mistakenly believing he lost nearly \$750,000 in a risky bet on the stock-trading app."It was a tragedy, and we went into immediate action to make sure that we made not just the most accessible options-trading product for our customers, but the safest as well," Tenev noted.

The GameStop debacle caused one of the biggest disruptions on Wall Street since the markets meltdown presaging the 2008/09 financial crisis, and could prompt the Securities and Exchange

Commission to come up with laws demanding greater transparency on short selling and other trading practices.

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Homeland Security: At Least 1 Million US Residents Without Power Amid Winter Storms  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Homeland Security Adviser Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall informed reporters Thursday that the winter weather situations in Texas and other areas "demonstrate to us that climate change is real and it's happening now and we're not adequately prepared for it."

Speaking of the ongoing storm that has begun to threaten Americans' livelihood, Sherwood-Randall revealed that at least one million individuals remain without power.

The Homeland Security official explained that due to the concentration of outages in Texas, the White House has authorized the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide "immediate assistance" to Texas.

At least 60 generators, 729,000 liters of water, 225,000 meals and tens of thousands of blankets have already been provided to Texas by FEMA, Sherwood-Randall highlighted.

Officials believe that while the power outages are rolling blackouts are likely to continue in Texas.

The Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) [announced](#) in a Thursday morning release that "significant progress" was made Wednesday night, but the grid operator and transmission owners remain at work to restore power to customers across the state.

"We're to the point in the load restoration where we are allowing transmission owners to bring back any load they can related to this load shed event," said ERCOT Senior Director of System Operations Dan Woodfin. "We will keep working around the clock until every single customer has their power back on."

ERCOT, which [operates without](#) federal oversight, delivers power to 90% of the Lone Star State. The remaining areas, including El Paso, Texas, are on the Western Interconnect grid.

In addition to Texas' estimated 492,000 power outages, Mississippi, Louisiana and Oregon have all been heavily impacted by the winter weather and chilly conditions.

As of this article's publication, [PowerOutage.US](#) logs at least 165,000 power outages in Mississippi, 120,000 blackouts in Louisiana and more than 100,000 power outages in Oregon.

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LA Authorities Seeking Information from Alleged Survivor Amid Marilyn Manson Abuse Claims - Report  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this month, actor and activist Evan Rachel Wood released a statement accusing Grammy-nominated American singer-songwriter Marilyn Manson - real name Brian Hugh Warner - of a litany of offenses, including abuse, blackmail and grooming. A number of other women have since come forward with similar allegations against the 52-year-old.

After receiving information from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), California's Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department is now slated to meet with at least one of the women who leveled abuse allegations against Manson, [TMZ reported](#) Monday, citing law enforcement sources.

The report highlights that it is currently unclear if the FBI will have future involvement in the matter if a probe is launched following the examination of allegations. It also remains unknown which accuser(s) will be contacted by law enforcement.

This reported development follows abuse allegations made public earlier this month by a number of women, including Wood, who began publicly dating Manson in 2007, at the age of 19. The two ultimately ended their [controversial relationship](#) after breaking off their engagement in 2010.

"The name of my abuser is Brian Warner, also known to the world as Marilyn Manson," Wood, now 32, wrote in a February 1 Instagram post.

"He started grooming me when I was a teenager and horrifically abused me for years. I was brainwashed and manipulated into submission," she alleged. "I am done living in fear of retaliation, slander, or blackmail."

The actor went on to claim in her release she has chosen to speak on the alleged abuses and misconduct "to expose this dangerous man and call out the many industries that have enabled him, before he ruins any more lives."

[Several women](#) have leveled similar [abuse allegations](#) against Manson this month, including artist Gabriella Accarino, who claimed the singer frequently offered her drugs and took advantage of her sexually.

Accarino also alleged that upon the second time meeting Manson, he "demanded we make a blood pact" before cutting her hand with glass.

Manson issued a statement the day after Woods', claiming such allegations "are horrible distortions of reality."

"Obviously, my art and my life have long been magnets for controversy, but these recent claims about me are horrible distortions of reality. My intimate relationships have always been entirely consensual with like-minded partners," he said on Instagram. "Regardless of how - and why - others are now choosing to misrepresent the past, that is the truth."

Manson's record label Loma Vista Recordings, as well as the Starz drama series "American Gods," have ended their working relationship with the 52-year-old in the wake of the mounting allegations against him.

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Experts Explain How Texas Energy Grid Unpreparedness Magnified Winter Storm Danger by [Evan Craighead](#)

As of this article's publication, more than 333,000 Texas households are without power and more than 100,000 homes in both Mississippi and Louisiana are experiencing blackouts amid the deadly winter storm system.

Meredith Angwin, a 30-year veteran of the utility industry and [author](#) of the book "Shorting the Grid," told Sputnik News Wednesday that while the "immediate cause of the outage was the terrible weather that Texas is experiencing," the ongoing snowstorms are exposing a bigger issue with the state's preparedness.

"The deeper causes, in my opinion, is that the electricity in the state of Texas is overly reliant on wind energy (which is not always available) and natural gas to back up the wind energy," she asserted.

"Natural gas has to be delivered to power plants in pipelines, and those pipelines are of fixed capacity. That is, even in the Northeast, where we are accustomed to very cold winter weather, our pipelines cannot handle the gas needs for homes (in a fierce cold snap) along with the gas needs for power plants."

Because the pipes are not designed to withstand extremely cold temperatures, they are prone to freeze, "bringing natural gas power plants offline."

"Some of our wind turbines also iced up and had to be taken offline, but that was a lesser problem. In the end, we were without 1/3 of our thermal power plant fleet," University of Texas at Austin Ph.D. Research Associate Joshua Rhodes explained to Sputnik News.

"We do plan for winter, but this is by far the most wind-spread and coldest weather that we have received in modern memory, so far beyond what we'd expect," he added.

Princeton University scientist Dr. William Happer also asserted to Sputnik News that an "extremely vulnerable" wind energy infrastructure played a "major" role in Texas' winter weather complications.

"Certainly, the large fraction of wind energy in Texas, and the unstable grid built to get the erratic wind power to customers was a major part of the problem," said Happer, who served on the US National Security Council during former US President Donald Trump's term.

At the same time, Rhodes claimed only "about 10%" of the power during Texas' winter peak comes from wind energy.

"While wind output was off by a couple thousand megawatts, our thermal fleet was off by tens of thousands of megawatts," he said. These power cuts will likely last until the weather warms up in a couple of days to reduce demand and allow more gas to flow to our power plant fleet."

The experts' comments come as some Texans impacted by the storm are beginning to recover, and others are still without power and safe water. The [Chicago Tribune](#) reports at least 40 deaths have been attributed to the extreme weather system.

With hotels packed, some are still struggling to find proper housing during the ongoing below-freezing temperatures.

Additional storms are expected to pelt parts of the US South, Mid-Atlantic and Northeast with snow and ice.

"We need to do a better job of winterizing our power plant fleet. We can easily handle high demands like this in the summer when we are all using air-conditioning and our grid typically peaks," Rhodes concluded, adding that it would also be wise to explore interconnecting "the Texas grid with other grids in North America."

Angwin, on the other hand, said that she views grids as "subject to a 'fatal trifecta':" "Overly dependent on renewables that cannot be scheduled to be on the grid; Overly dependent on just-in-time natural gas to back up the renewables [and] Planning to get electricity from the neighbors, when the same weather system is stressing the neighbors' grids."

"Build plants that store fuel on-site, like nuclear and coal, so the grid is not so dependent on unreliable sources!" she urged.

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E3, US Call on Iran to Avoid Any Additional Steps to Suspend Nuclear Protocols, Limit IAEA Access  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, Iran indicated that it would block snap inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) if parties of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) failed to fulfill their commitments under the agreement and lift sanctions against Tehran by February 21. The US, along with France, Germany and the UK, which make up the E3, called on Iran on Thursday to avoid taking any additional steps aimed at halting nuclear protocols or limiting the IAEA's access to nuclear sites within the Middle Eastern country.

The statement, which touches on a recent virtual meeting between foreign ministers of the E3 countries and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, highlights the growing efforts by the group to "ensure that Iran can never develop a nuclear weapon."

"The E3 and the United States affirmed their shared objective of Iran's return to full compliance with its commitments under the JCPOA," reads [the release](#). "Secretary Blinken reiterated that, as President Biden has said, if Iran comes back into strict compliance with its commitments under the JCPOA, the United States will do the same and is prepared to engage in discussions with Iran toward that end."

"In this context, the E3 and the United States called on Iran not to take any additional steps, in particular with respect to the suspension of the Additional Protocol and to any limitations on IAEA verification activities in Iran," it continued. The parties also urged Tehran to "consider the consequences of such grave action, particularly at this time of renewed diplomatic opportunity." Officials also "expressed their concern" during the meeting over Iran's move to increase uranium enrichment at the Fordow enrichment complex. Although fuel enriched at that level is not sufficient to produce a bomb, the statement described the uptick as a "key development of a nuclear weapon."

Additionally, Blinken and the top diplomats of the E3 called on Iranian officials to "release all our arbitrarily detained nationals."

The remarks came a day after Ned Price, the spokesperson for the US State Department, [urged](#) Iranian officials to reverse its actions against the IAEA, after Tehran announced it would begin placing limits on the JCPOA-mandated inspections if European countries failed to resolve sanctions against Iranian sectors.

Zarif Calls on US to End 'Economic Terrorism' Against Iran

Moments after the release was issued, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif issued a statement via Twitter that called on the Biden administration to end stifling Trump-era policies.

"Instead of sophistry & putting onus on Iran, E3/EU must abide by own commitments & demand an end to Trump's legacy of #EconomicTerrorism against Iran," Zarif [tweeted](#). "Our remedial measures are a response to US/E3 violations."

"Remove the cause if you fear the effect. We'll follow ACTION w/ action," he added.

Zarif's commentary largely echoed remarks he gave during an interview with CNN's Fareed Zakaria, in which he noted that if the Biden administration truly wants to cut ties with the so-called "maximum pressure" policies of the previous administration, it needs to lift its sanctions.

At the time, Zarif noted Iran would begin reducing IAEA inspections but that it did not necessarily "mean that the window [is fully shut](#)" in regards to JCPOA talks.

Under the Trump administration, the US left the 2015 nuclear deal in 2018 over unsubstantiated claims that the terms of the agreement had been violated by Iran, a move which then reimposed previously lifted sanctions. In response, Tehran began backing away from its commitments under the deal by [increasing the quantity of its uranium](#).

The Biden administration has repeatedly indicated that it intends to normalize ties with Iran; however, Blinken has stated that officials are weighing drawing up a new agreement with Iran that will also include Israel and fellow Gulf neighbors. Iran has firmly opposed the proposal.

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No Thanks! Dolly Parton Declines to Have Statue of Her Erected at Tennessee Capitol  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Last month, state Rep. John Mark Windle (D-TN) introduced legislation to erect a statue of American singer-songwriter Dolly Parton on the grounds of the Tennessee Capitol. The initiative was put forth in an attempt to honor the musician's multiple contributions to the state, including her decades-old initiative to help improve childhood literacy.

The Grammy-winning musician and composer revealed on Thursday that she has asked Tennessee lawmakers to abandon efforts to pass legislation that would see a statue of her placed at the Statehouse.

Parton explained in [a statement](#) that while she was grateful for the honor, she believed it was not the best time for such a project to be undertaken, presumably hinting at the US' ongoing effort to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, among other issues.

"I am honored and humbled by their intention but I have asked the leaders of the state legislature to remove the bill from any and all consideration," Parton wrote. "Given all that is going on in the world, I don't think putting me on a pedestal is appropriate at this time."

"I hope, though, that somewhere down the road several years from now or perhaps after I'm gone if you still feel I deserve it, then I'm certain I will stand proud in our great State Capitol as a grateful Tennessean," she continued.

"In the meantime, I'll continue to try to do good work to make this great state proud."

Parton's decline was quickly scooped up by netizens who urged that the "9 to 5" singer's graceful response was even more of a reason to honor her with a statue.

Others, however, opted to cheer on Parton for being a class act.

Aside from bestowing her music to the world, Parton has been hailed within her state and abroad for her constant efforts to ensure children have access to books. In fact, the musician launched a [gifting program](#) in 1995 that has expanded from Tennessee to Canada, the UK, Australia and Ireland.

And that's not all, folks. When the Volunteer State was engulfed in devastating wildfires in 2016, Parton put together a [fundraising effort](#) that saw some \$12.5 million go to provide affected families with a path to get back on their feet.

More recently, Parton made headlines after reports surfaced detailing her hefty donation to Vanderbilt University to develop a COVID-19 vaccine. Asked about the million-dollar contribution during an interview with BBC One's "The One Show," Parton [told presenters](#) she "just felt so proud to have been part of that little seed money that will hopefully grow into something great and help to heal this world."

Windle's bill, which was first introduced late last month, quickly marked a rare bipartisan moment at the Tennessee Statehouse after it was unanimously passed by the House Naming and Designating committee in early February. At the time, Windle told [local station WKRN](#) that Parton's efforts have "been much greater than a politician or a state woman or statesman." "We ought to honor her while we still have her," he underscored.

Aside from the statue bid, Parton has already twice turned down the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, when it was offered to her by former US President Donald Trump. The first offer was turned down because her husband was ill and the second because she did not want to travel amid the pandemic. Parton [previously indicated](#) she was unsure if she would accept the honor if offered by US President Joe Biden over concerns it may appear as a political move.

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Touchdown! NASA's Perseverance Rover Lands on Mars in Historic Mission  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The US' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Perseverance mission is considered its most sophisticated to date, and will mark the space agency's fifth rover to travel across portions of the red planet.

NASA's Perseverance rover officially landed on Mars on Thursday, completing a nearly 300-million-mile journey through space as part of a mission to find evidence of alien life.

"Touchdown confirmed," Swati Mohan, the guidance and control operations lead for the mission, announced at the historic moment. "Perseverance is safely on the surface of Mars and ready to begin seeking the sands of past life.

The rover's successful landing on the red planet was officially called at approximately 3:56 p.m. EST, after undergoing the so-called "[seven minutes of terror](#)" in which the probe lands

autonomously. Officials previously explained that the 14-minute information delay prevented engineers from manning the landing.

In the first few minutes after touchdown, the rover has managed to transmit two photos of the Martian landscape.

"This is a sign NASA works," Rob Manning, the chief engineer and landing veteran with the agency's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, [said](#) moments after the landing. "When we put our arms together and our hands together and our brains together, we can succeed. This is what NASA does."

"This is what we can do as a country. ... We need to work together to do these kinds of things and make success happen," he added.

The 2,260-pound rover landed in the Jezero Crater, which is considered to be one of the more dangerous landings sites chosen by NASA officials to date since its strewn with sharp rocks, hazardous cliffs and boulders. Scientists believe that since the crater is a former lakebed, it may hold the remains of long-dead microbes from Mars' much wetter past.

Moving forward, it will take several weeks before Perseverance begins executing its mission objective since engineers will first opt to spend time initiating system updates to ensure the rover will be able to navigate its new terrain.

With a price tag of some \$2.4 billion, Perseverance is considered the most technologically-advanced robot that NASA has deployed to Mars. Although its construction was largely based off its predecessor, Curiosity, the new-and-improved rover holds a suite of radars, cameras and even a small helicopter named [Ingenuity](#) that officials hope will be the first controlled flight to be done on a planet other than Earth.

Perseverance was initially launched toward Mars in late July 2020 from Florida's Cape Canaveral Air Force Station. It will spend at least two years - one Martian year - exploring the Jezero Crater; however, it won't be entirely alone as both China's Tianwen-1 and the United Arab Emirates' Hope probe will also be carrying out their own respective investigations.

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Pot, Meet Kettle - Political Cartoon

Although the Trump administration was no stranger to the bevy of criticism it received from the American public and abroad, disapproval seemed to reach a new level when former US President Donald Trump began to question whether bleach injections and sunshine were effective COVID-19 treatments during the height of the deadly pandemic.

Trump recently prompted the systematic raising of eyebrows after he lashed out at US President Joe Biden for criticizing his administration's efforts to clamp down on the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

In a [Wednesday interview](#) with Newsmax host Greg Kelly, Trump called Biden out after the commander-in-chief misspoke and stated the former president had left the White House with "no vaccine" in place, despite the fact that Biden received [both doses](#) of his Pfizer vaccine weeks before taking the presidential oath.

Trump went on to say that Biden was “either not telling the truth or he’s mentally gone - one or the other.” However, it appears as though Trump may have completely forgotten he made more than just a handful of missteps during his time in office, namely that he asked health officials on the White House coronavirus task force whether a treatment could be created with disinfectant and the sun’s rays.

Although Trump later reiterated he was making a sarcastic joke, it’s safe to say he more than missed the mark as The Donald’s statements even [forced Lysol](#), a brand of cleaning products, to issue a warning against the consumption of its disinfectants.

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US Life Expectancy Fell by One Year in First Half of 2020 as COVID-19 Deaths Rose  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier this month, a study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences offered insight into the life expectancy of Americans, and determined that it had dropped by 1.1 years as a result of the pandemic. The study also highlighted that Black and Latino populations had experienced larger reductions in life expectancy than white Americans.

[New findings](#) by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have revealed the American life expectancy fell by exactly one year during the first half of 2020, when COVID-19-related deaths were skyrocketing.

Published Thursday, the preliminary estimates released by the CDC note life expectancy plummeted to 77.8 years when compared to 2019 figures, with those of men and women falling to 75.1 years and 80.5 years, respectively.

The latest figures mark the largest drop since World War II, when life expectancy fell by 2.9 years between 1942 and 1943.

Researchers at the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics made the finding by analyzing some 99% of all US deaths, including provisional birth records, that were dated between January and June 2020.

Researchers also found the lifespan of Black Americans dropped to 72 years, a decline of 2.7 years that indicated its lowest level since 2001. The Latino community did not fare much better as officials determined it made up the second-biggest decline while life expectancy plunged by 1.9 years to 79.9 years.

Dr. Kristin Bibbins-Domingo, a health equity researcher and dean at the University of California, San Francisco, told the [Associated Press](#) that “Black and Hispanic communities throughout the United States have borne the brunt of this pandemic,” as they’re more likely to be employed by frontline, low-wage jobs.

With both communities having a history of pre-existing conditions, Bibbins-Domingo also noted that Black and Latino individuals had a higher risk of being diagnosed with severe cases of COVID-19. [CDC data](#) states that Black Americans and Latinos hospitalized with COVID-19 have died at about 1.9 and 2.3 times the rate of white Americans.

"It's very concerning when we see mortality increase to such a degree," Elizabeth Arias, a health scientist at the center and a co-author of the report, told [The Wall Street Journal](#). "It gives you a clear picture of the magnitude of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Although this is the first time the CDC has issued a release on life expectancy rates based on partial records, it has been widely acknowledged that 2020 was the deadliest year in American history as deaths [topped 3 million](#) by late December. To date, the US COVID-19 death toll has reached more than 492,000, according to [Johns Hopkins University](#).

The study did not analyze trends for Asian or Native American communities.

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PREVIEW - US Begins Phased Entry of Asylum-Seeking Migrants Forced to Return to Mexico Under Trump

EL PASO, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States on Friday will begin processing asylum-seeking migrants who were stranded at the border under the Trump administration's so-called Remain in Mexico policy.

The process will begin with a few dozen per day of thousands of those affected by the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program, HOPE Border Institute Deputy Director Marisa Limon told Sputnik.

"It will be 25 people per day for several weeks ramping up to 300 per day," Limon said.

"Approximately 26,000 folks have active MPP cases and are eligible for the process."

The Biden administration has an articulated plan in place in partnership with the UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM).

"There will be online registration, UNCHR and IOM will do almost all of the processing on the Mexican side of the border," Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center Executive Director Linda Rivas told Sputnik.

A Department of Homeland Security (DHS) spokesperson told Sputnik that Friday marks the start of the "phased approach" to process asylum-seeking migrants at three ports of entry on the US southern border. The San Ysidro port of entry in California's southern border with Mexico will be the first to start processing a small number of migrants that registered ahead of time, the official added.

Two other ports of entry in Texas will begin processing in the coming days due to logistical and operational factors. Processing in Brownsville, Texas will begin on Monday and El Paso on February 26, the spokesperson said.

"DHS will begin by processing limited numbers of individuals to ensure any logistical challenges are identified and addressed before ramping up to full capacity," the spokesperson said. "In the coming days and weeks, designated ports will expand their capacity to several hundred people each day."

Immigrant advocacy groups in El Paso, Texas, have been preparing for the last several weeks to receive large numbers of migrants in the near future.

President Joe Biden has eased restrictive Trump-era immigration policies and has already directed his advisers to review current US immigration policies. However, his White House has discouraged migrants from coming to the US-Mexico border, warning them that many will be turned away because no proper system is in place yet to process their asylum claims. On Thursday, Democrats in the Senate and House of Representatives formally introduced Biden's immigration bill, the US Citizenship Act, that would create a path to citizenship for 11 million immigrants, establish smarter border security, address the root cause of mass migration to the US southern border, and boost efforts to reunite families separated under the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy.

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US Senator Cruz Says 'Firestorm' Over Cancun Trip Brought Him Back to Texas

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Senator Ted Cruz said he returned to Texas after seeing the firestorm of criticism he received over his decision to leave on vacation to Cancun, Mexico while Texas struggles with severe winter weather.

"When I arrived and saw the initial firestorm, what had started with second thoughts that I had as soon as we left, grew even greater," Cruz told reporters on Thursday. "I certainly regret that this has become a distraction."

Cruz said in an earlier statement that he went to Cancun because his daughters wanted to go on a trip with friends.

On Wednesday, Cruz faced backlash from Texas residents, primarily Democrats, who called for his resignation, after photos of him taking a flight to Cancun circulated on social media.

More than 300,000 homes in Texas do not have power amid the storm, which represents an improvement to the more than 3.1 million homes that were first affected on Monday.

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UPDATE 2 - NASA's Perseverance Rover Lands on Mars in Search of Ancient Microbial Life

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - NASA's Perseverance Mars Rover landed on the Red Planet on Thursday, surviving a perilous 7-minute descent suspended by cables in the final minutes from a saucer-shaped spacecraft that slowed the plunge to walking speed before releasing the six-wheeled robot.

The touchdown, broadcast live on the internet by NASA TV, marked the beginning of a mission in which the rover will explore the dry-bed of an ancient lake and river delta for signs of microbial life that could have lived in a watery environment 3 million years ago.

Apart from its focus on Martian geology, the rover also includes devices to prepare for future exploration of the Red Planet, including a machine the size of a car battery that will attempt to make oxygen from Martian carbon dioxide, NASA said.

The rover also has a drill and other instruments to collect samples of Martian rocks and soil - and store them in sealed tubes for pickup by a future mission to ferry the debris back to Earth. Strapped to the rover's underbelly, a tiny helicopter named Ingenuity will attempt to explore the nearby surface by navigating planet's thin atmosphere.

The rover is also equipped to look for supplies of underground water, needed if humans eventually travel to the planet's dry surface.

NASA said the descent began when the rover and its saucer shaped escort craft, enclosed in a cone-shaped capsule, hit the top of Mars atmosphere traveling at 12,500 miles per hour.

After four minutes, a parachute deployed to slow the descent to about 200 miles per hour, NASA said. The atmospheric entry vehicle then jettisoned the heat shield and dropped its cargo - allowing the saucer-shaped escort spacecraft to lower the rover on cables while slowing the descent to less than 2 mph for touchdown, it added.

NASA previously described the final seven minutes of the six-month journey from Earth as the most dangerous part of the mission, with no guarantee of Thursday's success.

President Joe Biden reacted to the landing after watching it from the Oval Office.

"Congratulations to NASA and everyone whose hard work made Perseverance's historic landing possible. Today proved once again that with the power of science and American ingenuity, nothing is beyond the realm of possibility," Biden said in a tweet.

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Biden Administration to Keep Tariffs on China Amid Review - Treasury Secretary Yellen  
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The White House expects to keep in place tariffs on China left by the Trump administration though it will evaluate what is appropriate going forward, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in an interview.

"Tariffs work," Yellen told CNBC on Thursday. "We'll look at the moment with the tariffs that were, you know, put in place by the Trump Administration. We expect China to adhere to the commitments that were made and we'll evaluate going forward what we think is appropriate." Yellen's stance was in line with what President Joe Biden said in an interview with the New York Times in December. Then president-elect, Biden said that he's not planning to reverse his predecessor's tariffs on Chinese goods imported into the United States as quickly as he plans to reverse other Trump-era policies.

Much of the legacy action against China which Biden inherited has to do with the Trump administration's near two-year trade war and tariffs on Beijing, which according to the Washington-based Brookings Institute amounted to \$46 billion in penalties paid mostly by US companies themselves.

Yellen said the White House was being deliberate in its review of existing policies on China because of the administration's own concerns that went beyond trade.

"There are a range of issues where we see unfair practices," she said. "It's not just trade but in some cases forced technology transfer, subsidies to high technology in Industries. There are security concerns and we want to make sure that we do address these and China abides by its International obligations in these areas. I think it's important."

Aside from the trade war, the Trump administration had targeted China's tech giant Huawei, which it accused of spying on the United States and of stealing US technology.

The Commerce Department under Trump also accused popular Chinese video streaming app TikTok of illegally sharing with its government data on its American users, and tried unsuccessfully to force the US arm of that business to be sold to an American company. The alleged mistreatment by China of its Uighur Muslim minorities is also something the previous administration had stood up against - a stance that seems to be shared by the current White House.

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#### Canadians Increasingly Turning Away From Queen, Monarchy - Poll

TORONTO, February 18 (Sputnik) - Canadians are increasingly skeptical in their support for Queen Elizabeth II as the official head of state and the future of the monarchy in the country, a new Angus Reid Institute poll revealed.

"There has also been a notable decline over the past five years in willingness to recognize Queen Elizabeth II as the official head of state for Canada. Now, half say they would continue to do so, while half disagree," the poll said on Thursday.

The latest results show dramatic fall in support from last January, when 61 percent of respondents said they support recognizing Queen Elizabeth II as the head of state and April 2016 when 64 percent expressed support for Canada's monarch.

The findings also revealed that only 32 percent of Canadians believe that the country should remain a constitutional monarchy going forward - down from 42 percent in April 2016. Forty-six percent say that Canada should seek an alternative form of government, while 22 percent were unsure.

The poll was conducted in the immediate aftermath of Governor General Julie Payette's resignation. The Queen's representative in Canada resigned in disgrace last month after the Privy Council Office delivered an explosive report concerning the allegations made earlier this summer of widespread harassment of employees at Rideau Hall - the Monarch or its representative's residence in Ottawa.

According to the poll, 76 percent of Canadians believe that the Governor General role can be filled by a serving government official and 43 percent support eliminating the position outright.

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## Lives of 3Mln Children in Eastern DRC at Risk Amid Militia Attacks - UNICEF

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - Militia violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) threatens the future of some 3 million internally displaced children in the east of the country, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said in a new report on Friday.

"By November 2020, official figures showed there were around 5.2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in DRC, mostly in the four eastern provinces of North and South Kivu, Ituri and Tanganyika. Just over 3 million of the IDPs are children, including nearly half-a-million under the age of 5," the report said.

A succession of brutal attacks by fighters armed with machetes and heavy weaponry in the DRC's eastern region over the past three years has forced entire communities to abandon their villages with the barest of possessions, the report said.

The uptick in violence is caused by a combination of factors, including land disputes, ethnic animosities, availability of arms and weak governance. The perpetrators kill entire families, destroy schools and hospitals and burn down villages.

Families displaced by the violence live in crowded settlements, while others are absorbed into already impoverished local communities, where children lack basic items, including water, food and sanitation.

UNICEF Representative for the DRC Edouard Beigbeder said the displaced children know nothing but fear, poverty and violence.

"Generation after generation can think only of survival. We must do more to encourage these children's hopes of a better future," Beigbeder said.

While delivering aid to displaced populations is often hampered by insecurity and weak transport infrastructure, the international community must maintain and step up assistance to the DRC, the report also said.

UNICEF's 2021 humanitarian appeal for the DRC for \$384.4 million being funded only at 11 percent fund seems the international community "is looking the other way," the report added. All parties to the conflict must end the brutal assaults and provide humanitarian access to the displaced populations, according to the report.

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## Pentagon Chief Tells Saudi Counterpart US Committed to Assist Border Defense - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin told his Saudi counterpart that the United States is committed to protecting the country from Houthi attacks, Pentagon Spokesman John Kirby said in a statement.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke by phone with Saudi Minister of Defense His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman," Kirby said on Thursday. "The Secretary condemned the recent Houthi cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia and expressed his commitment to assisting Saudi Arabia in the defense of its borders."

Austin reaffirmed the strategic defense partnership between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kirby said.

The Pentagon chief also discussed the importance of ending the war in Yemen, he added.

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**Biden to Announce Friday US Release of \$4Bln for Vaccines to Poor Nations - White House**

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce at the G7 gathering on Friday that the United States will release \$4 billion for an international initiative to supply coronavirus vaccines to poor countries, the White House said.

"The United States will provide an initial \$2 billion contribution to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance for the COVAX Advance Market Commitment, the innovative financing instrument of the COVAX Facility, which supports access to safe and effective vaccines for 92 low- and middle-income economies," the White House said in a fact sheet released ahead of the virtual summit.

An additional \$2 billion will be made available through 2022 dependent on donor pledges being fulfilled and initial vaccine doses delivered.

"We also call on our G7 and other partners to work alongside Gavi, to bring in billions more in resources to support global COVID-19 vaccination, and to target urgent vaccine manufacturing, supply, and delivery needs," the White House said.

The funds were appropriated by a bipartisan Congressional vote in December 2020.

Former US President Donald Trump refused to participate in the COVAX initiative because of its ties to the World Health Organization (WHO). Trump withdrew the United States from the WHO after accusing it of attempts to cover up China's alleged responsibility for the coronavirus pandemic.

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**US Would Accept Invitation to Attend P5+1 Meeting With Iran - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to accept an invitation to attend a meeting with Russia, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, China, and Iran to discuss Tehran's nuclear program, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"The United States would accept an invitation from the European Union High Representative to attend a meeting of the P5+1 and Iran to discuss a diplomatic way forward on Iran's nuclear program," Price said on Thursday.

In 2015, Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with the P5+1 group of countries (the United States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom - plus Germany) and the European Union. The agreement required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and severely

downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief, including lifting the arms embargo five years after the deal's adoption. The Trump administration exited the deal in 2018. Earlier on Thursday, the top diplomats of the E3 countries and the United States in a joint statement affirmed strong interest in continuing coordination, including with China and Russia, on Iran. The diplomats also called on Iran to avoid taking any additional steps aimed at suspending the nuclear protocols and limiting the access of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In December, Iran passed a law to increase its uranium enrichment and stop UN inspections of its nuclear sites in response to the killing of nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. At the start of January, Iran's atomic energy organization announced that the country had succeeded in enriching uranium at 20 percent at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant.

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US, Nordic Nations Sign Arctic Strategy Letter for Joint Military Exercise - Air Force

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Acting US Air Force Secretary John Roth and defense ministers from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden signed a letter of intent backing US strategy in the Arctic ahead of a joint military exercise in June, the Defense Department said in a press release.

"We have a common vision and shared set of values in upholding security and stability in the Arctic region," Roth said in the release on Thursday. "Strong, enduring relationships with our allies and partners are essential to safeguarding peace in the region."

The letter demonstrates continued support for the Arctic Challenge Exercise (ACE) scheduled for June 2021. Held every two years, ACE is one of Europe's largest tactical air exercises, the release said.

Sweden hosted the previous exercise in 2019, featuring 140 aircraft and 4,000 military personnel from nine participating nations, including the United States, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom, according to the release.

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Governor Abbott Announces Reforms to Prevent Future Power Crises in Texas

EL PASO, February 18 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott told reporters that he requested the state legislature to investigate the energy collapse amid the snow storm and approve reforms to preclude such development from occurring again.

The largest oil and gas producer in the United States faces severe blackouts affecting millions of households amid very low temperatures that caught local utility companies off-guard.

"We have already begun the process to make sure that events like this never again happen in Texas. And that starts with reforming the agency in charge of electric reliability in Texas, which is ERCOT. What happened this week to our fellow Texans is absolutely unacceptable and can never be replicated again," Abbott said during a press conference on Thursday.

The governor added that he issued an executive order asking the Texas legislature to investigate what happened at ERCOT that "led up to and during the course of the response to this winter storm."

"Today, I am adding more emergency items to the legislative session. First, I am asking the legislature to mandate the winterization of generators and the power system. Second, I am calling for the funding needed to ensure that this winterization and modernization occurs," Abbott said.

According to the latest data, Texas has no power generation shortfalls but some 325,000 state residents still stay without electricity due to obstructed connections to the grid.

The winter storm has also caused drinking water shortages across Texas with 725 water systems under "boil notice" affecting 13 million residents.

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US House Democrats Follow Senate With Citizenship Bill for 'Dreamers,' Others - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US House Democrats followed the Senate in introducing President Joe Biden's US Citizenship Act, opening a path to citizenship for long-term residents who entered the country illegally as well as other categories of immigrants, Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced.

"Democrats are making good on President Biden's Day One promise with landmark legislation that honors our values, protects families and strengthens our country," Pelosi said in a press release on Thursday.

Senate Democrats introduced the legislation earlier in the day.

The legislation allows so-called "dreamers" - residents brought to the US as children illegally - to obtain citizenship, as well as recipients of Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which is often granted to immigrants from nations hit with natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes, the release said.

Biden has pledged to make citizenship available to an estimated 11 million long-term undocumented immigrants live in the United States. Republicans have criticized the move saying the number of illegal aliens in the United States is at least 22 million and Democrats seek to secure a future voter constituency to stay in power.

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US Imposes Visa Restrictions on 43 More Belarusians - State Department

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed visa restrictions on additional 43 Belarusians, including high-ranking officials, accusing them of undermining the country's democracy, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced.

"Today, the U.S. Department of State took action pursuant to Presidential Proclamation (PP) 8015 to impose visa restrictions on 43 Belarusian individuals responsible for undermining Belarusian democracy, making them generally ineligible for entry into the United States," Blinken said in a statement.

The move targeted "high-ranking justice sector officials; law enforcement leaders and rank-and-file personnel who detained and abused peaceful demonstrators; judges and prosecutors involved in sentencing peaceful protesters and journalists to prison terms; and academic administrators who threatened students for participation in peaceful protests." It followed two earlier rounds of designations that imposed visa restrictions on 66 individuals determined by the US to be responsible for "undermining Belarusian democracy."

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US Withdraws Trump's Administration Statements on Reimposing Iran Sanctions - Letter UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States withdrew the former Trump administration declaration of reimposing all United Nations sanction on Iran, US Acting Permanent Representative to the world body Richard Mills announced in a letter.

"I write to notify the Security Council, on behalf of my Government, that the United States of America hereby withdraws its letters to the Security Council of August 20, 2020 (S/2020/815), August 21, 2020 (S/2020/822), and September 21, 2020 (S/2020/927)," Mills wrote to the UN Security Council president on Thursday.

On August 20, then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo sent a letter to the then UN Security Council President Dian Triansyah Djani requesting that the 2015 nuclear agreement's snapback sanctions mechanism under UN Resolution 2231 be invoked.

A month later, Pompeo announced that all the previously scrapped UN sanctions against Iran were being reinstated.

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US Would Accept Invitation to Attend P5+1 Meeting With Iran - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to accept an invitation to attend a meeting with Russia, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, China, and Iran to discuss Tehran's nuclear program, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"The United States would accept an invitation from the European Union High Representative to attend a meeting of the P5+1 and Iran to discuss a diplomatic way forward on Iran's nuclear program," Price said on Thursday.

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#### Vaccine For COVID South Africa 'Mutant' Virus Variant May Take Months - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US government infectious diseases expert Dr. Anthony Fauci has warned that it will probably take several months to develop a vaccine for the South African variant of the novel coronavirus, media reports said.

Developing a vaccine for the South African strain of the virus will probably take several months, Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and chief medical adviser to President Joe Biden told MSNBC in an interview on Thursday.

The US government was already working with producer Moderna to develop such a vaccine, Fauci said, adding that he was confident Pfizer was also working on such a project.

The current vaccines might not protect against mild to moderate disease with the South African isolate but data strongly suggested that it would still work quite effectively against serious disease, keeping people out of the hospital and preventing them from dying, Fauci said.

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#### Some 300,000 Texans Still Without Electricity Despite Sufficient Generation - Governor

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Texas generates enough electricity for each household but some 325,000 state residents remain without power due to obstructed connections to the grid, Governor Greg Abbott told reporters.

The largest oil and natural gas producing state in the country is experiencing this week record low temperatures which caused numerous blackouts affecting millions of Texans.

"As of this press conference right now there are no outages of power across the state of Texas because of lack of generation or lack of the ability to generate power," Abbott said Thursday.

"There continue to be approximately 325,000 Texans without power. However, those without power are not without power because the lack of ability to generate power. Instead those without power are being impacted either by power lines that are down or the need to manually reconnect the premises to power."

He said that since Wednesday power supply has been restored to homes of some two million state residents, but warned that another wave of below-freezing temperatures is expected across Texas tonight.

Power outages have also resulted in drinking water shortages in the state. According to the latest data, 725 water systems are under boil notice affecting 13 million Texans.

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Google, Twitter CEOs to Testify Before Congress on 'Misinformation' - US House Committee

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The heads of Google, Facebook and Twitter will testify in Congress on the issue of misinformation next month, the US House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee said in a statement.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg together with Google CEO Sundar Pichai and Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey will appear before lawmakers at the Energy and Commerce Committee on March 25, the statement said.

"Whether it be falsehoods about the COVID-19 vaccine or debunked claims of election fraud, these online platforms have allowed misinformation to spread, intensifying national crises with real-life, grim consequences for public health and safety," committee Chairman Frank Pallone said on Thursday.

The lawmakers called on the tech giants to acknowledge their role in elevating misinformation to online audiences.

"Industry self-regulation has failed. We must begin the work of changing incentives driving social media companies to allow and even promote misinformation and disinformation," the statement said.

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US Urges Georgia to Exercise Restraint During Political Crisis - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States calls on Georgia to avoid escalating violence during the political crisis in the country and exercise restraint, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned after a court ordered the arrest of an opposition party leader.

"We call on all parties to exercise restraint and avoid any actions or rhetoric that could escalate tensions or result in violence," Price said on Thursday expressing deep concerns over recent political developments in Georgia. "We urge the Georgian government to act in line with its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and to reinforce its commitment to the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and rule of law by ensuring that its judicial and prosecutorial system is free of political bias."

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#### NASA's Perseverance Rover Lands on Mars in Search of Ancient Microbial Life

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - NASA's Perseverance Mars Rover landed on the Red Planet on Thursday, surviving a perilous 7-minute descent suspended by cables in the final minutes from a saucer-shaped spacecraft that slowed the plunge to walking speed before releasing the six-wheeled robot.

The touchdown, broadcast live on the internet by NASA TV, marked the beginning of a mission in which the rover will explore the dry-bed of an ancient lake and river delta for signs of microbial life that could have lived in a watery environment 3 million years ago.

Apart from its focus on Martian geology, the rover also includes devices to prepare for future exploration of the Red Planet, including a machine the size of a car battery that will attempt to make oxygen from Martian carbon dioxide, NASA said.

The rover also has a drill and other instruments to collect samples of Martian rocks and soil - and store them in sealed tubes for pickup by a future mission to ferry the debris back to Earth. Strapped to the rover's underbelly, a tiny helicopter named Ingenuity will attempt to explore the nearby surface by navigating planet's thin atmosphere.

The rover is also equipped to look for supplies of underground water, needed if humans eventually travel to the planet's dry surface.

NASA said the descent began when the rover and its saucer shaped escort craft, enclosed in a cone-shaped capsule, hit the top of Mars atmosphere traveling at 12,500 miles per hour. After four minutes, a parachute deployed to slow the descent to about 200 miles per hour, NASA said. The atmospheric entry vehicle then jettisoned the heat shield and dropped its cargo - allowing the saucer-shaped escort spacecraft to lower the rover on cables while slowing the descent to less than 2 mph for touchdown, it added.

NASA previously described the final seven minutes of the six-month journey from Earth as the most dangerous part of the mission, with no guarantee of Thursday's success.

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#### US National Security Advisor, Singapore Minister Discuss Myanmar Crisis - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan discussed the ongoing crisis in Myanmar in a telephone conversation earlier this week with Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, National Security Council (NSC) spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke by phone on February 16 with Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan of Singapore," Horne said on Thursday. "They expressed deep concern

regarding the situation in Burma and agreed that peaceful protests should not be met with violence."

Sullivan and Balakrishnan also discussed opportunities to strengthen the US-Singapore strategic partnership and enhance cooperation across security, economic, digital and people-to-people domains, the statement said.

Sullivan reaffirmed the Biden administration's commitment to the central role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the region and the continuing US commitment to helping the area recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, Horne said.

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Top US Security Adviser, Austrian Chancellor Discuss Coordinating on China - White House

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz have spoken about China and the Western Balkans among other matters during a phone call on Wednesday, NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement on Thursday.

"Mr. Sullivan expressed the Biden Administration's appreciation for the strong US-Austria relationship and commitment to restoring transatlantic ties," Horne said. "They also discussed coordination on shared foreign policy priorities, including the Western Balkans and China, as well as opportunities to protect religious freedom worldwide."

Sullivan and Kurz also agreed to work together on common global challenges, including climate change, economic recovery and counterterrorism, the spokesperson added.

Earlier, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with his Australian, Indian and Japanese counterparts - members of the so-called Quad - the necessity to promote freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region. The Pentagon's "free and open" Indo-Pacific strategy calls for countering China in the region.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik)

PUTIN-ERDOGAN TALKS

\* The presidents of Russia and Turkey, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, discussed the potential deliveries of Russian coronavirus vaccines to Turkey and possibility of the vaccine production in Turkey, the Kremlin said on Thursday.

\* Putin and Erdogan discussed the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, including Moscow-Ankara cooperation on the socio-economic development of the region, the Kremlin said.

\* Putin offered condolences to Erdogan over the death of 13 Turkish nationals in Iraq, the Kremlin said.

#### NATO DEFENSE MINISTERS MEETING

\* The defense ministers of the NATO member states have not yet made a final decision on the alliance's mission in Afghanistan, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Thursday, adding that discussions are ongoing.

\* NATO has confirmed its decision to expand its training mission in Iraq and plans to gradually increase the alliance's contingent there from 500 to 4,000 troops, Stoltenberg said.

\* US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin assured NATO allies that the United States will not withdraw from Afghanistan in a hasty or disorderly manner, the Pentagon said in a statement.

#### NEW ITALIAN GOVERNMENT

\* The Italian Chamber of Deputies has expressed overwhelming support in the new Italian government led by Mario Draghi in a vote of confidence.

#### WINTER STORM IN US

\* At least one million people in the United States are still experiencing power outages because of the severe winter storm that hit the country, Homeland Security Adviser Liz Sherwood said on Thursday.

\* At least 38 people died in Texas and other US states due to the powerful winter storm, CNN reported.

#### ESTONIA EXPELLS RUSSIAN DIPLOMAT

\* The Russian diplomat expelled by Estonia must leave the country within a week, Moscow responds in a reciprocal manner, a Russian diplomatic source familiar with the situation told Sputnik.

\* Moscow is expelling a diplomat from the Estonian embassy in response to the declaration of a Russian diplomat persona non grata by Tallinn, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

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#### NASA'S Perseverance Rover Lands on Mars in Search of Ancient Microbial Life

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - NASA's Perseverance Mars Rover landed on the Red Planet on Thursday, surviving a perilous 7-minute descent suspended by cables in the final minutes from a saucer-shaped spacecraft that slowed the plunge to walking speed before releasing the six-wheeled robot.

The touchdown, broadcast live on the internet by NASA TV, marked the beginning of a mission in which the rover will explore the dry-bed of an ancient lake and river delta for signs of microbial life that could have lived in a watery environment 3 million years ago.

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**NASA CONFIRMS PERSEVERANCE ROVER LANDS ON SURFACE OF MARS  
Sputnik**

US Immigration Agency Has Interim Rules Focusing on National, Border Security - Statement WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) said on Thursday it has introduced interim rules focusing the agency's operations on national security and border security.

"ICE's interim guidance will focus the agency's civil immigration enforcement and removal resources on threats to national security, border security and public safety," the agency said in a press release.

ICE will focus on apprehending migrants illegally entering the United States, individuals suspected of being involved in terrorism or espionage, and individuals engaged in gang or transnational criminal organizations, the release said.

The interim rules will be in placed until Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas issues new enforcement guidelines within 90 days, the release said.

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**US, E3 Urge Iran to Avoid Additional Steps to Suspend Nuclear Protocols, Limit IAEA Access**

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The E3 countries and the United States on Thursday issued a joint statement calling on Iran to avoid taking any additional steps aimed at suspending the nuclear protocols and limiting the access of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"In this context, the E3 and the US called on Iran not to take any additional steps, in particular with respect to the suspension of the Additional Protocol and to impose any limitations on IAEA verification activities in Iran," the statement said. "The E3 and the United States are united in underlining the dangerous nature of a decision to limit IAEA access, and urge Iran to consider the consequences of such grave action, particularly at this time of renewed diplomatic opportunity."

The top diplomats of the E3 and the United States have affirmed strong interest in continuing coordination with China and Russia on Iran.

"The E3 welcomed the United States' stated intention to return to diplomacy with Iran as well as the resumption of a confident and in-depth dialogue between the E3 and the United States," the statement said. "The Ministers affirmed strong interest in continuing their consultations and coordination, including with China and Russia, on this key security issue, recognizing the role of the High Representative of the European Union as Coordinator of the Joint Commission."

The statement continued to say that the E3 countries and the United States stated their shared concerns about Tehran's recent actions to produce both uranium enriched up to 20% and uranium metal.

The E3 welcomed the prospect of a US and Iranian return to compliance with the nuclear deal. "The E3 and the United States affirmed their determination to then strengthen the JCPOA and, together with regional parties and the wider international community, address broader security concerns related to Iran's missile programs and regional activities," the statement said. "We are committed to working together toward these goals."

Besides, the four leaders have committed to working together to de-escalate tensions in the Gulf region, and underscored the urgency of ending the war in Yemen.

"On Yemen, the Ministers agreed to work closely together to support United Nations Special Envoy Griffiths' efforts to end the war and to address the humanitarian crisis," the ministers said. "They expressed concern about the recent Houthi offensive against Marib and strikes against civilian infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, calling upon the Houthis and all Yemeni parties to engage constructively in the political process."

The Ministers have also talked about the recent attack in Erbil, efforts against the Islamic State (banned in Russia), the situation in Myanmar, the pandemic as well as the importance to enhance NATO.

"The Ministers agreed to closely coordinate to address the global challenges posed by China, as well as the need for cooperation across a range of issues, including climate change," the statement said.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif asked European stakeholders to help synchronize the US and Iran's return to compliance with the pact after Washington's pullout from the deal in 2018 prompted Tehran to gradually breach some of the limits set in the agreement.

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. Earlier this month, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said that by the end of February Tehran was going to reduce the presence of UN inspectors in the country.

In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA with the P5+1 group of countries (the United States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom - plus Germany) and the European Union. It required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and severely downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief, including lifting the arms embargo five years after the deal's adoption. The Trump administration exited the deal in 2018.

In December, Iran passed a law to increase its uranium enrichment and stop UN inspections of its nuclear sites in response to the killing of nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh. At the start of January, Iran's atomic energy organization announced that the country had succeeded in enriching uranium at 20 percent at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant.

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Robinhood CEO Apologizes for Role in US GameStop Saga, Says 'Won't Happen Again'

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The chief executive of Robinhood Markets apologized on Thursday to retail investors who felt let down by the trading application in the GameStop shares debacle that triggered one of Wall Street's biggest market upheavals in a decade. "I'm sorry for what happened," Vlad Tenev, a Bulgarian native who migrated to the United States at the age of five and became a billionaire after setting up Robinhood in 2013, told a Congressional hearing held to investigate the GameStop controversy. "Despite the unprecedented market conditions in January, at the end of the day, what happened is unacceptable to us, and to our customers. I'm sorry, and I apologize. Please know that we are doing everything we can to make sure this won't happen again."

Shares of GameStop suddenly surged last month, from around \$20 to over \$400, after retail stock buyers on social media site Reddit pushed the video-gaming retailer's shares higher in an apparent organized bid to frustrate hedge funds "shorting" those shares in a move to drive their price down.

Shorting is essentially selling shares one does not already own at a higher price and buying them back lower to pocket a profit. It's a strategy that can make huge profits when done well. But in the case of GameStop, some of the hedge funds on the other side of the retail investors on Redditors lost billions of dollars as the shares rose heavily in price after they were shorted. Even as retail investors appeared to have won the day, those on Reddit were furious with Robinhood for restricting them from buying more GameStop shares at the height of the stock's rally that could have added to their profit, accusing it of protecting its hedge fund customers from further losses. Robinhood's restrictions eventually caused GameStop shares to fall from their highs.

The trading app later said it was acting to meet the capital requirements placed on the firm by the clearing house for US equity transactions. But the Reddit crowd was not pacified, and has filed multiple class-action lawsuits against the brokerage.

Retail investors also accuse Robinhood of colluding with at least one hedge fund — Citadel — to stop them out of GameStop. Citadel is one of Robinhood's main clients in providing "order flow" for the brokerage's trades.

Order flow, a legitimate but controversial practice, is where major market makers like hedge funds pay apps like Robinhood a fee for executing their other customers' trades with them. Critics say payment for order flow creates a conflict of interest that allows market makers to trade ahead of retail investors.

Tenev told Thursday's hearing that the decision to restrict purchases of GameStop was "purely driven" by surging deposit and collateral requirements imposed upon his firm, and that he was not acting at the behest of hedge funds.

"We don't answer to hedge funds," Tenev told the lawmakers who questioned him in Congress. "We serve the millions of small investors who use our platform every day to invest. Robin Hood immediately secured additional funds all together through capital raising and other measures. We've increased our liquidity by more than three billion dollars to cushion ourselves against increased collateral requirements and related markets' stress in the future."

The GameStop debacle caused one of the biggest disruptions on Wall Street since the markets meltdown presaging the 2008/09 financial crisis, and could prompt the Securities and Exchange Commission to come up with laws demanding greater transparency on short selling and other trading practices.

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Pfizer, BioNTech Launch Trial to Test COVID-19 Vaccine in Pregnant Women - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Pfizer and BioNTech launched a new clinical trial in nine countries including the United States, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom (UK) and Brazil to test their COVID-19 vaccine in pregnant women, the companies said in a statement on Thursday.

"Phase 2/3 trial will enroll approximately 4,000 healthy pregnant women in the US, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mozambique, South Africa, UK, and Spain," the release said. "Women enrolled in the trial will be unblinded shortly after giving birth to allow those women who originally received placebo to be vaccinated while staying in the study."

The study will further evaluate the safety, tolerability, and immunogenicity of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine (BNT162b2) in preventing COVID-19 in healthy pregnant women 18 years of age and older, the release said.

"Pregnant women have an increased risk of complications and developing severe COVID-19, which is why it is critical that we develop a vaccine that is safe and effective for this population," Pfizer Senior Vice President of Vaccine Clinical Research and Development William Gruber said in the release.

The Phase 2/3 trial is designed as a randomized, placebo-controlled, observer-blind study in approximately 4,000 healthy pregnant women 18 years of age or older vaccinated during 24 to 34 weeks of gestation, BioNTech said.

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E3, US Ministers Stress Urgent Need to End Yemen's War, Condemn Houthis' Marib Offensive

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The E3 group and the United States in a joint statement on Thursday stressed the urgent need to end the conflict in Yemen and expressed concern about the Houthi rebel's recent offensive against the Marib governorate.

Earlier in the day, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab held a virtual ministerial meeting to address shared challenges.

"They stressed in particular the urgency of ending the war in Yemen, while reaffirming their steadfast commitment to the security of their regional partners," the joint statement said. "They expressed concern about the recent Houthi offensive against Marib and strikes against civilian infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, calling upon the Houthis and all Yemeni parties to engage constructively in the political process."

The ministers also agreed to cooperate to support the efforts led by UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths to end the war and address the humanitarian crisis, the statement said. Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthis rebels since 2014. A coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia launched a military operation to support the internationally recognized Hadi government in 2015. The Houthis continue to maintain control over a vast part in the north of the country, including the capital of Sanaa.

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Democrats Introduce Biden Immigration Bill in Congress - US Senate Majority Leader  
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Democrats have formally introduced President Joe Biden's immigration bill in Congress, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday.

"Today, Democrats are taking a momentous step in establishing a better immigration system for our nation by introducing the US Citizenship Act," Schumer said in a statement.

Schumer explained the legislation creates a pathway to citizenship for undocumented and documented immigrants residing in the United States.

The bill also addresses the root cause of migration to the US-Mexico border, establishes smart border management strategy, and boosts efforts to reunite migrant families separated by the Trump administration's "zero-tolerance" policy.

Biden is expected to ease the restrictive Trump-era immigration policies and has already directed his advisors to review current US immigration policies.

On Friday, the Biden administration will begin processing asylum applications for about 25,000 migrants who were forced to wait in Mexico under the former administration's Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program.

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US Senator Cruz Ends Vacation After Backlash for Leaving Texas Amid Winter Storm

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Senator Ted Cruz on Thursday put an early end to his vacation trip to the resort town Cancun, Mexico, after being criticized for leaving Texas as the state struggles with power outages amid a severe winter storm.

"With school canceled for the week, our girls asked to take a trip with friends," Cruz said in a statement. "Wanting to be a good dad, I flew down with them last night and am flying back [to Texas] this afternoon."

Cruz said his staff is in constant communication with state and local leaders in Texas, working to address the power outages and other issues related to the winter storm.

On Wednesday, Cruz faced backlash from Texas residents, primarily Democrats, who called for his resignation, after photos of him taking a flight to Cancun circulated on social media. More than 400,000 homes in Texas do not have amid the storm, which represents an improvement to the more than 3.1 million homes that were first affected on Monday.

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US House Bill Seeks Ban on Imports From China Made With Uighur Forced Labor -  
Congressman

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers have introduced a bipartisan bill to ban all imports of Chinese goods for which there is a "rebuttable presumption" they were produced by forced Uyghur labor, Congressman James McGovern said in a press release on Thursday. "The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act would create a 'rebuttable presumption' that any goods made in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) are made with forced labor and prohibited from entering the United States unless 'clear and convincing' evidence is shown to the contrary," the release said.

The legislation is an updated version of resolution (HR) 6210 that passed in the House of Representatives on September 22 by a vote of 406 to three, the release noted.

"We have watched in horror as the Chinese government first created, and then expanded a system of extrajudicial mass internment camps targeting Uyghurs and Muslim minorities. We now know the entire XUAR economy is built upon a foundation of forced labor and repression," McGovern said in the release.

Congress needed to hold the Chinese government accountable and give a strong voice to the millions of Muslim Uyghurs, Congressman Chris Smith, co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, said in the release.

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E3, US Ministers Affirm Interest in Continuing Coordination With China, Russia on Iran

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The top diplomats of the E3 and the United States in a joint statement on Thursday affirmed strong interest in continuing coordination with China and Russia on Iran.

"The E3 welcomed the United States' stated intention to return to diplomacy with Iran as well as the resumption of a confident and in-depth dialogue between the E3 and the United States," the statement said. "The Ministers affirmed strong interest in continuing their consultations and coordination, including with China and Russia, on this key security issue, recognizing the role of the High Representative of the European Union as Coordinator of the Joint Commission."

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US Airlines Hire, Rehire 13,000 Full-Time Employees in December - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) – Full-time employment at 17 leading US passenger airlines rose by 13,000 from mid-November, mid-December, the US Department of Transportation said on Thursday.

"The 17 US scheduled passenger airlines employed 3.4% more full-time equivalents (FTEs) in mid-December 2020 than in mid-November 2020. Mid-December's total number of FTEs (379,302) was up 12,552 from mid-November (366,750 FTEs), the Department of Transportation said in a press release said.

The coronavirus pandemic and accompanying travel restrictions have forced US airlines to trim schedules and lay off employees, a trend somewhat mitigated by billions of dollars in federal aid conditioned on airlines continuing to fly, even if planes are mostly empty.

Despite increased employment, December 2020 had the fewest number of full-time workers for any December since Department of Transportation began collecting monthly reports in 1990. Earlier this week, Department of Transportation reported that US airlines carried 60 percent fewer passengers than in 2019, the year before the pandemic.

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US, E3 Urge Iran to Avoid Additional Steps to Suspend Nuclear Protocols, Limit IAEA Access

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The E3 countries and the United States on Thursday issued a joint statement calling on Iran to avoid taking any additional steps aimed at suspending the nuclear protocols and limiting the access of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"In this context, the E3 and the US called on Iran not to take any additional steps, in particular with respect to the suspension of the Additional Protocol and to impose any limitations on IAEA verification activities in Iran," the statement said. "The E3 and the United States are united in underlining the dangerous nature of a decision to limit IAEA access, and urge Iran to consider the consequences of such grave action, particularly at this time of renewed diplomatic opportunity."

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US Senate Intelligence Committee to Hold Hearing on SolarWinds Hack February 23 - Notice

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Intelligence Committee will hold a hearing concerning the massive cyberattack against network monitoring company SolarWinds on February 23, the panel said in an advisory on Thursday.

"Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Chairman Mark R. Warner (D-Va) and Vice Chairman Marco Rubio will hold an open hearing examining the SolarWinds hack on Tuesday, February 23, 2021," the notice said.

SolarWinds President and CEO, Sudhakar Ramakrishna as well as the top executives from other affected companies – FireEye, Microsoft and CrowdStrike – will testify at the Senate committee, the notice said.

On Wednesday, a White House cybersecurity official said the US government considers a Russian actor to be responsible for the hack.

Moscow denies the charges and Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik last month that the United States is using the media to spread different versions of what caused the SolarWinds cyberattack, but it never showed any proof that Russia was complicit in it.

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Pentagon Chief Told NATO US Will Not Undertake Hasty Exit From Afghanistan - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin assured NATO allies on Thursday that the United States will not withdraw from Afghanistan in a hasty or disorderly manner, the Pentagon said in a statement.

"He told the Allies that the US is conducting a thorough review of the conditions of the US-Taliban Agreement to determine whether all parties have adhered to those conditions. And he made clear that he is committed to consulting with Allies and partners throughout this process. He reassured Allies that the US would not undertake a hasty or disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan," the statement said.

Austin spoke at the second and final day of the NATO Defense Ministerial.

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US Considers Iran 'Long Way From Complying' With Nuclear Agreement - White House

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States considers Iran to be far from complying with the 2015 nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"Iran is a long way from complying," Psaki said. "Our focus is on working with our partners and allies to engage and coordinate on a range of issues, including the future of the Iran nuclear deal."

Psaki said US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has a virtual meeting with his E3 counterparts later this afternoon.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif asked European stakeholders to help synchronize the US and Iran's return to compliance with the pact after Washington's pullout from the deal in 2018 prompted Tehran to gradually breach some of the limits set in the agreement.

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. Earlier this month, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said that by the end of February Tehran was going to reduce the presence of UN inspectors in the country.

In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA with the P5+1 group of countries (the United States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom - plus Germany) and the European Union. It required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and severely downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief, including lifting the arms embargo five years after the deal's adoption. The Trump administration exited the deal in 2018.

In December, Iran passed a law to increase its uranium enrichment and stop UN inspections of its nuclear sites in response to the killing of nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh. At the start of January, Iran's atomic energy organization announced that the country had succeeded in enriching uranium at 20 percent at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant.

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UN Chief to Convene Informal Five-Plus-One Meeting on Cyprus Very Soon - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will very soon convene an informal meeting with the leaders of the two Cypriot communities and the guarantors Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Thursday.

"Following the consultations conducted by Senior UN official, Ms. Jane Holl Lute, over the past several months, the Secretary-General intends to convene an informal five-plus-one meeting on the Cyprus issue very soon. A formal announcement will follow," Dujarric said.

The spokesman explained the meeting would aim to determine whether a common ground exists so that the parties can negotiate a sustainable and lasting solution to the Cyprus problem. Cyprus was split between Greek and Turkish communities in 1974 after Turkey invaded the island to protect Turkish Cypriots following an uprising of Greek Cypriots that resulted in a change of government and atrocities. In 1983, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus declared independence, but it has not been recognized by any other country except for Turkey. The United Nations has attempted to broker a reunification dialogue, but the effort has failed and the dialogue stalled since the last round of talks in Switzerland's Crans-Montana in 2017.

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### Fears of Catching COVID-19 From Touching Packaged Food Prove Unfounded - US Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Scientists in the United States and other nations tried and failed to find any credible evidence that the novel coronavirus is transmitted by handling food or food packaging, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said on Thursday.

"Consumers should be reassured that we continue to believe, based on our understanding of currently available reliable scientific information, and supported by overwhelming international scientific consensus, that the foods they eat and food packaging they touch are highly unlikely to spread SARS-CoV-2 [COVID-19]," the FDA said in a press release.

The FDA emphasized that COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that is spread from person to person, unlike foodborne or gastrointestinal viruses, such as norovirus and hepatitis A, which often make people ill through contaminated food.

As for food packaging, the FDA said the number of virus particles that could theoretically be picked up by touching a surface would be far too small to reach a threshold needed for inhalation.

The FDA said it published the release based on the best available information from scientists across the globe and an international consensus of an exceedingly low risk of human transmission.

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### At Least 1M In Americans Still Without Power Due to Winter Storm - US Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - At least one million people in the United States are still experiencing power outages because of the severe winter storm, Homeland Security Adviser Liz Sherwood said on Thursday.

"We know that there's still about a million or more people who are experiencing power outages in the hardest hit areas of the country," Sherwood told reporters.

More than four million Americans suffered power outages this week, according to PowerOutage.us, including more than 3 million within Texas alone. There were still nearly 500,000 without power in Texas as of midday Thursday.

Massive snow storms descended upon the central and eastern US states in recent weeks, slowing or in some cases shutting energy production down in places like Texas.

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US Must Decouple From China's Economy to Win 'New Cold War' - Senator Cotton

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States must end economic dependence on Beijing in this new Cold War era in order to stop China's rise, Senator Tom Cotton said on Thursday.

"The greatest foreign policy challenge America faces... is our new Cold War with China," Cotton told a Reagan Foundation podcast as he unveiled a new report on how to counter Beijing. "We need to stop China's rise."

Cotton's new report calls for a "targeted decoupling" from China's economy and for massive cuts in the number of Chinese students studying in the United States. In particular, he demanded an end to granting visas for Chinese students to study science and technology at graduate and postgraduate levels.

Cotton also called for sanctioning alleged human rights abusers and Chinese companies that steal American intellectual property.

A nation like the United States that was dependent on China for essential medicines and medical supplies as well as the rare earth elements necessary for its high tech devices and to keep its combat aircraft in the sky was not secure and was not a superpower, Cotton said.

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**Biden to Focus on COVID-19, Rebuilding Global Economy at G7 Gathering - White House**

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will focus on the efforts to defeat the novel coronavirus pandemic and rebuild the global economy during the virtual G7 gathering on Friday, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters.

"This virtual engagement with leaders of the world's leading democratic market economies will provide an opportunity for President Biden to discuss plans to defeat the COVID-19 pandemic and rebuild the global economy," Psaki said. "President Biden will focus on a global response to the pandemic, including coordination on vaccine production, distribution of supplies, as well as continued effort to mobilize and cooperate against the threat of emerging infectious diseases." Psaki said the US president will also discuss the global economic recovery, including the importance of industrialized countries maintaining economic support for the recovery. Among other issues, Biden is expected to address the global climate crisis and economic challenges posed by China, she added.

The February 19 virtual engagement will be hosted by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson as part of the United Kingdom's G7 presidency ahead of the planned summit in June. The engagement will be the first gathering of G7 leaders since April 2020.

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**Senate Panel Sets February 25 Confirmation Hearing for US Trade Representative Nominee Tai**

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Katherine Tai, President Joe Biden's nominee for US Trade Representative, will face Senators at her confirmation hearing set for February 25, the Senate Finance Committee announced on Wednesday.

"Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Katherine C. Tai, of the District of Columbia, to be United States Trade Representative, with the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary," the notice said, with the date attached.

Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden previously praised Tai's nomination as an "inspired choice," indicating likely confirmation by the full Senate.

Tai previously served as chief trade counsel for the US House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee.

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More than four million Americans suffered power outages this week, according to PowerOutage.us, including more than 3 million within Texas alone. There were still nearly 500,000 without power in Texas as of midday Thursday.

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US House Panel to Probe Texas Energy Infrastructure Failure in Record Cold Snap - Speaker

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - A US House committee will examine power failures due to days of sub-zero cold in Texas that created prolonged electricity blackouts in much of the state, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday.

"The Energy and Commerce Committee will be taking up some form of [investigation] - when I say investigation I mean a look into it to see how things could have turned out better and will turn out better in the future," Pelosi said.

At issue is the need to weatherize Texas' energy infrastructure to protect people from the future freezes, Pelosi said.

Media reports blamed the blackout on windmills not equipped to withstand the cold, as well as weather-related shutdowns natural gas and thermal power plants, which cut off water supplies as well as power in much of the otherwise energy-rich state.

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US Oil Output Down 200,000 Barrels Per Day as Snow Storms Blanket Country - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US crude production is estimated to have fallen 200,000 barrels per day (bpd) as drilling for oil is impacted by snow storms blanketing the country, data from the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) revealed on Thursday. Crude production fell to an estimated 10.8 million bpd last week, just after increasing for the first time in months to 11 million bpd the previous week, the EIA's weekly dataset on supply and demand showed.

US crude production stood at a record high of 13.1 million bpd just 11 months ago before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, but the demand destruction that set in thereafter reduced

the output. Production is also expected to be on the wane hereon as the Biden administration focuses more on green and renewable energy sources rather than fossil fuels. A hail of snow storms have descended upon central and eastern United States in recent weeks, slowing or in some cases shutting energy production in places like Texas. At least 500,000 homes in Texas did not have power on Thursday morning after as many 3.1 million were impacted a day earlier by the worst snowstorm in 30 years to hit the state. Analysts at ANZ Bank and Citigroup have estimated that at least 2 million bpd of US shale oil production had been curtailed by the storm in Texas. Citigroup analysts also estimated a cumulative production loss of 16 million barrels through early March.

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#### UN Experts Urge Venezuela to Drop Charges Against Released Human Rights Workers

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - UN human rights experts in a statement on Thursday urged Venezuela to drop the charges against the members of the humanitarian non-government organization (NGO) Azul Positivo and stop attacks against civil society. "We urge the authorities to drop the charges against the five human rights defenders of Azul Positivo," the experts said. "We call on the authorities to review restrictive laws and practices to ensure compliance with Venezuela's obligations under international human rights law, and respect and protect the work of civil society, including women human rights defenders." On January 12, five members of Azul Positivo - an NGO supporting vulnerable communities through workshops on reproductive health - were detained in Zulia state. The human rights defenders were released on February 10, but they still face charges relating to terrorism, terrorism financing and money laundering. The experts said that in recent months, Venezuela adopted new regulations restricting NGOs' access to international funding, including resources to address the humanitarian crisis. They urged the government to review these regulations and prioritize attention to the crisis.

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#### RPT - UN Chief Urges Countries to Join US in Committing to Carbon Neutrality by 2050

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday called on countries worldwide join the United States in committing to net zero emissions by 2050 to prevent the worst effects of climate change. President Joe Biden has pledged to put the United States, the second-largest producer of carbon emissions after China, on track to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. "President Biden's commitment to net-zero emissions means that countries producing two-thirds of global carbon pollution are pursuing the goal of carbon neutrality by 2050," Guterres said in a

press conference. "If adopted by every country, city, financial institution and company around the world, a global coalition for carbon neutrality by 2050 can still prevent the worst impacts of climate change."

Guterres also called the Biden administration's decision to reenter the Paris Climate Accord, which takes place on Friday, a "key moment" that strengthens global action toward sustainability.

Shortly after his inauguration on January 20, Biden signed an executive order re-enlisting the United States in the Paris Agreement, reversing the Trump administration's withdrawal from the 2015 agreement.

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Blinken, Quad Counterparts Discuss Need to Restore Government in Myanmar - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a virtual meeting with his Australian, Indian and Japanese counterparts - the so-called Quad - that there is an urgent need to restore the democratically elected government in Myanmar, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne, Indian Minister of External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar, and Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi," Price said in a readout of the conversation. "The ministers also discussed countering disinformation, counterterrorism, maritime security, the urgent need to restore the democratically elected government in Burma [Myanmar], and the priority of strengthening democratic resilience in the broader region."

Price said the officials also discussed the necessity to promote freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region and reaffirmed their mutual support for ASEAN centrality.

"They reiterated their commitment to the Quad meeting at least annually at the ministerial level and on a regular basis at senior and working levels to strengthen cooperation on advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region, including support for freedom of navigation and territorial integrity," he said.

On February 1, the Myanmar military overthrew the government and declared a year-long state of emergency just hours before the newly-elected parliament was due to convene.

The military accused State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other senior officials of election fraud and placed them under house arrest. The move has sparked protests across Myanmar.

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Record 12.4 Million People in Syria Face Food Insecurity in 2021 - World Food Program

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - The World Food Program (WFP) said in a press release on Thursday that an additional 4.5 million Syrians have become food insecure over the past year, bringing the total number of people on the brink of hunger to a record 12.4 million. "A record 12.4 million Syrians - nearly 60 percent of the population - are now food insecure," the release said. "In just over one year, an additional 4.5 million Syrians have become food insecure."

The UN agency said that, an economic crisis, job losses amid the pandemic and soaring food prices have added up to the suffering of Syrian people worn down by a decade of conflict. "The situation has never been worse. After ten years of conflict, Syrian families have exhausted their savings as they face a spiraling economic crisis," WFP Representative and Country Director in Syria Sean O'Brien said in the release.

In just over a year, the number of people who are severely food insecure - unable to survive without food assistance - has doubled to reach 1.3 million, the release said.

The agency warned that an additional 1.8 million more would become severely food insecure unless urgent action is taken. To ensure that aid continues to flow into Syria, the WFP requires an additional \$375.3 million until July 2021.

The UN Office of the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs said earlier it will need a total of \$4.2 billion to target 10.5 million in Syria with assistance this year.

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#### Canada Imposes Sanctions on 9 Myanmar Military Officials - Global Affairs

TORONTO, February 18 (Sputnik) - Canada has imposed sanctions on nine Myanmar officials, including the country's leader Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, in response to the coup d'etat carried out by Myanmar's armed forces earlier this month, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement on Thursday.

"Marc Garneau, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that in response to the coup d'état in Myanmar, Canada is imposing sanctions against 9 Myanmar military officials, under the Special Economic Measures (Burma) Regulations," the statement said.

The measures were imposed in coordination with the United Kingdom a week after the United States sanctioned ten individuals and three entities in Myanmar.

The sanctioned individuals also include Hlaing's deputy Soe Win, Minister of Home Affairs Lt. Gen. Soe Htut and State Administration Council Member and Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Navy, Tin Aung San.

The sanctions freeze all assets the affected individuals may hold in Canada and prohibit Canadians in engaging in financial dealings with the designated officials.

On February 1, Myanmar's military overthrew the government and declared a year-long state of emergency. The military has placed under house State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, along with other top officials it has accused of election fraud.

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#### UN Needs \$4Bln to Run Humanitarian Operations in Yemen in 2021 - Under-Secretary-General

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations seek \$4 billion to continue its humanitarian assistance in Yemen for the rest of 2021, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock said on Thursday.

"The UN response plan this year will need about \$4 billion," Lowcock told a UN Security Council meeting.

Lowcock noted that the UN aid operation in Yemen received about \$1.9 billion in 2020 - only half of the money that were initially requested. As the result, the United Nations was forced to shut down numerous programs, including those providing clean water and sanitation, and many more are at risk to be closed in 2021.

The upcoming virtual pledging conference on March 1 would become an opportunity to avert famine this year and urged all donors to pledge generously or disperse money before the event.

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US Mothballs 17 B-1 Lancers to Begin Bomber Modernization Effort - Air Force

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The US fleet of 62 B-1 bombers will shrink with the retirement of 17 of the legacy aircraft as part of a bomber modernization program, the Air Force said on Thursday.

"Continuous combat operations over the last 20 years have taken a toll on the airframe's structure. Currently, a small portion of the B-1Bs are in a state that will require approximately ten to thirty million dollars per aircraft to get back to a status quo fleet in the short term until the B-21 comes online," the Air Force said in a press release.

The retirement, approved by Congress in the National Defense Authorization Act, will trim the B-1 fleet to 45 active aircraft, with four of the retired planes required to remain in reclaimable condition, the Air Force said.

The replacement B-21 bomber promises a fifth-generation bomber with extended range and advanced stealth technology. Details remain shrouded in secrecy although reports in defense media publications suggest the aircraft will not come on line for another ten years.

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Blinken, Ghani Discuss Ongoing Review of US Strategy in Afghanistan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani discussed the United States' strategy in Afghanistan, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke yesterday with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to discuss the United States' ongoing review of its strategy in Afghanistan," Price said in a statement.

Blinken expressed the US government's commitment to support the peace process, durable political settlement and permanent and comprehensive ceasefire in Afghanistan, the statement said.

"The Secretary emphasized that the United States will continue close consultations with Afghanistan's leaders, NATO Allies, and international partners on the way ahead," Price said.

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Blinken, Quad Foreign Ministers Discuss Advancing Freedom of Navigation in Indo-Pacific

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with his Australian, Indian and Japanese counterparts - members of the so-called Quad - the necessity to promote freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Thursday.

"The participants reaffirmed their mutual support for ASEAN centrality," Price said. "They reiterated their commitment to the Quad meeting at least annually at the ministerial level and on a regular basis at senior and working levels to strengthen cooperation on advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region, including support for freedom of navigation and territorial integrity."

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**Biden Declares Winter Storm Crisis in US State of Oklahoma - Federal Emergency Agency**

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has approved a state of emergency in the Midwest state of Oklahoma because of a continuing severe winter storm there, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said in a press release on Thursday.

"Yesterday, President Joseph Biden declared that an emergency exists in the State of Oklahoma and ordered federal assistance to supplement state, tribal, and local response efforts due to the emergency conditions resulting from a severe winter storm beginning on February 8, 2021, and continuing," the release said.

Biden's action authorizes FEMA to coordinate all disaster relief efforts to alleviate the hardship and suffering caused by the emergency on the local population and to provide appropriate assistance for required emergency measures, the release explained.

"Robert Fenton, Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Administrator, FEMA, Department of Homeland Security, named Adam Burpee as the Federal Coordinating Officer for federal recovery operations in the affected areas," the release said.

Emergency protective measures for mass care and sheltering and direct federal assistance will be provided at 75 percent federal funding, the release added.

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**UN Yemen Envoy Says Houthi Attacks on Marib Put Millions of Civilians at Risk, Must Stop**

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths in a Security Council meeting on Thursday called on the rebel Houthi movement to stop its offensive on Yemen's Marib governorate, as the fighting puts millions of civilians lives at risk.

"Over the past month, the conflict in Yemen has taken a sharp escalatory turn with Ansar Allah's [Houthi's] most recent offensive on Marib governorate," Griffiths said. "I have denounced this many times since early last year when this offensive operation started, and I will repeat my call

now: the attack on Marib must stop. It puts millions of civilians at risk, especially with the fighting reaching camps for internally displaced persons.”

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Blinken, Quad Ministers Discuss Need to Restore Elected Govt in Myanmar - State Dept

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a virtual meeting with his Australian, Indian, Japanese Counterparts the urgent need to restore the democratically elected government in the conflict-torn Myanmar, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

“Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne, Indian Minister of External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar, and Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi,” Price said in a readout of the meeting. “The ministers also discussed countering disinformation, counterterrorism, maritime security, the urgent need to restore the democratically elected government in Burma, and the priority of strengthening democratic resilience in the broader region.”

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Thirty-Eight People Die Amid Severe Winter Storm in Texas, Other US States - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - At least 38 people died in the Texas and other US states due to the powerful winter storm, CNN reported on Thursday.

The storm continues unabated for the fifth consecutive day, the report said.

As of Thursday morning, almost half a million residents of Texas remain without electricity, according to the utility tracker Poweroutage.us. More than 300,000 residents continue to experience power outages in the neighboring states of Mississippi and Louisiana, it added.

Earlier in the day, the National Weather Service issued winter storm warnings for a number of states and the Washington, DC metropolitan area.

“Major winter storm to impact the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast with heavy snow and significant ice accumulations today. Much below-average temperatures continue to linger over the Central/Southern Plains into the Middle/Lower Mississippi Valley,” the National Weather Service said.

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US Jobless Claims Rise After 4-Week Slide as COVID-19 Struggles Continue - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US weekly jobless claims rose for the first time in five weeks, with some 861,000 Americans filing for first-time unemployment benefits last week, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that showed the job market's continued difficulty in turning the corner from the COVID-19.

"In the week ending February 13, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 861,000, an increase of 13,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.

Prior to last week, claims had fallen four weeks in a row. But the declines were also narrower in each of those weeks, showing the stranglehold the coronavirus pandemic has on the jobs market.

Economists polled by US media had predicted 765,000 claims in the latest round of reporting by the Labor Department.

"The employment data is going the wrong way," contrary to efforts to grow jobs, Greg Michalowski, analyst at ForexLive, observed in a commentary.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said last week the United States was "still very far" from a strong jobs market due to the protracted COVID-19 crisis.

He added that achieving maximum employment, as per the Fed's mandate, would require supportive monetary policy and contributions from across government and private sector.

President Joe Biden, since taking office on January 20, has made the passing of a \$1.9 trillion relief package his top priority.

The Labor Department also said that continuing weekly claims — reported with a one-week lag but sometimes considered a better gauge of the labor market — slid to 4.49 million for the week ended February 13, from a previous 4.56 million. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, remained stagnant at 3.2 percent.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus.

A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, less than 700,000 jobs were added each month. In November, there were just 245,000 additions while December saw a loss of 140,000 jobs — the first such decline since April — before a growth of 49,000 in January.

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Facebook Expands Number of Climate Science Centers, Features to Expose 'Climate Myths'

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Facebook's Climate Science Information Center, currently available in the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany, will expand to more than a dozen additional nations and include a new feature targeting "climate myths," the social media giant said on Thursday.

"From today our center will also be available in Belgium, Brazil, Canada, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Spain, South Africa and Taiwan," Facebook said in a press release.

Facebook also added a section that "features facts that debunk common climate myths. Examples of climate myths cited by Facebook, albeit without elaboration, include claims that too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere harms Earth's plant life and polar bear populations are declining because of global warming, Facebook said without elaborating.

The expanded climate feature will host "climate communication experts" at George Mason University, the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the University of Cambridge, Facebook said.

In countries where the climate center is not available, Facebook said it will direct users to the United Nations Environment Program.

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US Lacks Funding to Meet Manned Moon Landing Goal in 2024 - Acting NASA Administrator

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is unlikely to meet its Artemis program goal of landing astronauts again on the Moon by 2024 because of lack of sufficient funding, Acting National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Administrator Steve Jurczyk said in an interview published on Thursday.

"The 2024 lunar landing goal may no longer be a realistic target due to the last two years of appropriations, which did not provide enough funding to make 2024 achievable," Jurczyk, told the Ars Technia news website. "In light of this, we are reviewing the program for the most efficient path forward."

Earlier this month, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the Biden administration would continue and support the Artemis program to return to the Moon and later send a manned expedition to Mars that was launched by the previous Trump administration. Jurczyk confirmed this in his interview

"The administration supports the goals of the Artemis program and we are excited about next steps. We fully intend to maintain the continuity of purpose of the Artemis program," he said. Biden's decision to preserve and support the Artemis program was widely welcomed in the US space industry, the report noted.

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Israel, US Begin Developing Missile Defense System Arrow 4 - Defense Ministry

MOSCOW/WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Israel and the United States began joint development of the missile defense system Arrow 4, the Israeli Defense Ministry said on Thursday.

"Another significant reinforcement of a joint multi-layered defense program between the United States and Israel: Israel Missile Defense Organization in the Mafat [a joint body of Israel's Defense Ministry and the Israel Defense Forces] and the MDA [Missile Defense Agency] have started the development of an Arrow 4 interception system with the IAI [Israel Aerospace Industries]," the ministry wrote on Twitter.

The Arrow system, currently consisting of installations of previous generations, Arrow 2 and Arrow 3, is aimed at protecting the skies of the Jewish state from long-range missiles.

Arrow 4 will be an advanced interceptor missile with enhanced capabilities, which will address a number of threats in the region, the US MDA said in a separate statement. This system will replace Arrow 2 interceptors over the coming decades, it added.

MDA Director Vice Adm. Jon Hill described Arrow 4 as an example of cooperation between the United States and Israel. The system illustrates US commitment to assisting Israel in upgrading its national missile defense capability, he said.

The Arrow Weapon System (AWS) is a major element of Israel's multi-layered missile defense array, MDA said.

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US Life Expectancy Drops to Lowest Level in 15 Years Amid Coronavirus Pandemic - CDC

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Life expectancy in the United States dropped in the first half of 2020 to its lowest level in 15 years amid the coronavirus pandemic, data released by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) showed on Thursday.

"In the first half of 2020, life expectancy at birth for the total US population was 77.8 years, declining by 1.0 year from 78.8 in 2019," the CDC said.

The data showed that it was the lowest US life expectancy since 2006, the CDC said.

Minorities suffered the worst from the pandemic, with life expectancy for Black Americans declining by nearly three years, and Hispanics by almost two years, the CDC data showed.

"Life expectancy by Hispanic origin and race Between 2019 and the first half of 2020, life expectancy decreased 2.7 years for the non-Hispanic black population (74.7 to 72.0)," the CDC data said. "It decreased by 1.9 years for the Hispanic population (81.8 to 79.9) and by 0.8 year for the non-Hispanic white population."

The CDC's data showed that life expectancy at birth for males was 75.1 years in the first half of last year, and decreased by 1.2 years from 76.3 years in 2019.

Meanwhile, for females, life expectancy declined to 80.5 years from 81.4 years in 2019, according to the CDC.

The United States remains the country hardest hit by COVID-19, with health officials reporting more than 27.8 infections and over 490,000 deaths since the start of the pandemic, according to the Johns Hopkins University's Coronavirus Resource Center.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims at 861,000 Last Week as COVID-19 Struggles Continue - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Some 861,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, demonstrating the job market's continued difficulty in turning the corner from the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending February 13, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 861,000, an increase of 13,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.