

Wires 9/10/20

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Microsoft Says Hackers From Russia, China Attacking US Presidential Campaigns

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The tech giant Microsoft said on Thursday that it has spotted multiple cyberattacks from Russia, China and Iran on individuals and organizations involved in the ongoing presidential campaigns in the United States.

"In recent weeks, Microsoft has detected cyberattacks targeting people and organizations involved in the upcoming presidential election, including unsuccessful attacks on people associated with both the Trump and Biden campaigns," the company said on its blog. "The activity we are announcing today makes clear that foreign activity groups have stepped up their efforts targeting the 2020 election as had been anticipated."

Microsoft said that attackers - the hacker groups Strontium, Zirconium and Phosphorus - operate from Russia, China and Iran, respectively.

Among more than the 200 Strontium targets are US-based consultants serving Republicans and Democrats, think tanks, national and state political party organizations in the United States as well as political parties in the United Kingdom.

According to Microsoft, Strontium was also identified in the Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report as the organization primary responsible for the alleged attacks on the Democratic presidential campaign in 2016.

"Microsoft's Threat Intelligence Center (MSTIC) has observed a series of attacks conducted by Strontium between September 2019 and today," the company said.

Russia has repeatedly denied interfering in the US political system, saying the allegations have been invented to excuse Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton's loss in the 2016 election as well as deflect public attention from actual instances of election fraud and corruption.

Microsoft said that China's Zirconium attacked high-profile individuals involved in the election, including people associated with Joe Biden's campaign and "prominent leaders in the international affairs community." Iran's Phosphorus continues to attack personal accounts of people associated with the Donald Trump's campaign, according to the publications.

Microsoft pointed out that the majority of the attacks were detected and stopped by security tools built into its products. The company added that it has notified those who were targeted or compromised so they can take action to protect themselves.

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US Stocks Fall Back After Rebound Amid Stalemate Over COVID-19 Bill

NEW YORK, Sept 10 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street fell back on Thursday after a one-day rebound as US lawmakers' inability to agree to a new coronavirus relief bill sapped investor appetite for risk.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest indicator on the New York Stock Exchange, virtually gave back all of Wednesday's gains, closing down 406 points, or 1.5 percent, at 27,534. Just last week, the Dow was scaling 29,000, extending a months-long rally before three days of torrid selling that began at the end of last week.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, fell 63 points, or 1.8 percent, to close at 3,337, after hitting an all-time high of 3,588 last week.

The Nasdaq Composite index finished down 222 points, or 2 percent, at 10,920. The index touched record highs above 12,000 last week.

Senate Republicans backing President Donald Trump voted on Thursday for a coronavirus relief bill to address continued health and economic hardship caused by the lockdown and other pandemic-related measures. However, the move fell short of the minimum 60 votes required for the measure to become law.

Previous bipartisan efforts helped US lawmakers pass four phases of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act that allotted roughly \$3 trillion. Both Democrats and Republicans have blamed each other for the drag over the fifth installment of the CARES Act.

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US-India Anti-Terror Forum Urges Pakistan to Crack Down on Islamist Groups - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - Pakistan needs to move against Islamist terror groups that continue to operate from Pakistani soil, the US-India Counter Terrorism Joint Working Group said in a statement that was released by the State Department on Thursday. "The two sides underlined the urgent need for Pakistan to take immediate, sustained, and irreversible action to ensure that no territory under its control is used for terrorist attacks, and to expeditiously bring to justice the perpetrators of such attacks, including 26/11 Mumbai and Pathankot," the statement said.

The Pakistani terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba was blamed for the November 2008 attack on Mumbai, a four day siege by gunman that resulted in the deaths of at least 174 people, including nine of ten attackers. A second Pakistani terror group, Jaish-e-Muhammad, led a 2016 bombing in Kashmir that killed as many as 40 Indian police officers.

President Donald Trump has halted US military aid to Pakistan, citing the nation's failure to crack down on terror groups.

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Trump Says US Started Dialogue With Saudi Arabia Regarding Mideast Peace Talks

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has started a dialogue with Saudi Arabia regarding the Middle East peace talks, US President Donald Trump said during a press briefing on Thursday.

"I spoke to the king of Saudi Arabia, so we're talking, we just started the dialogue and you'll have them come in," Trump said.

The United States recently brokered a peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and is trying to persuade other Arab nations to make similar deals.

Trump said one other country could join the bilateral agreement between Israel and the UAE by the time the signing ceremony takes place at the White House next week.

The UAE is the third Arab country to have concluded a full peace agreement with Israel after Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994.

Trump expressed confidence that other countries will agree to peace deals in the Middle East in a short period of time.

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US to Reduce Number of Troops in Iraq to 2,000 in 'Very Short' Period of Time - Trump

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump told reporters on Thursday his administration will reduce the number of American troops in Iraq to 2,000 in a very short period of time.

"Iraq, we'll be down to about 2,000 soldiers in a very short period of time," Trump said.

On Wednesday, Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Gen. Frank McKenzie said the United States would reduce its troop presence in Iraq from about 5,200 to 3,000 troops this month.

McKenzie said the remaining US troops in Iraq will continue their current mission by providing assistance to and advising their local partners. He also expressed confidence in the capability of Iraqi forces to prevent the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) from making a resurgence and to maintain security in the country.

Trump also reiterated during the briefing that the number of US troops in Afghanistan will be reduced to 4,000 and that a small number of US troops will remain in Syria to protect oil fields in the northeast of the country and to help the Kurds there.

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Pompeo to Attend Afghanistan Peace Talks in Qatar - Trump

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) – US President Donald Trump said Thursday that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will head to the Qatari capital of Doha later in the day to participate in Afghan peace talks.

"I can announce, with great pride, that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will be departing this evening on a historic trip to Doha ... for the beginning of intra-Afghan peace negotiations," Trump told reporters at the White House.

Negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government are set to kick off in Qatar on September 12, Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem Wardak confirmed via Twitter earlier on Thursday.

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Trump Nominates William Ruger to Be US Ambassador to Afghanistan - White House

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump has decided to nominate foreign policy expert William Ruger to be the next United States ambassador to Afghanistan, the White House said in a statement on Friday.

Some US officials, the Wall Street Journal reported earlier in September, view the decision to pick Ruger as a sign that Trump wants to ensure troops are removed from Afghanistan quickly. Ruger, in a piece in The National Interest in May, wrote that Trump correctly concluded that a "full and speedy withdrawal" of US troops is imperative.

"Today, President Donald J. Trump announced his intent to nominate the following individual to a key position in his Administration: William Ruger, of Virginia, to be Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan," the statement said.

Ruger serves as Vice President for Research and Policy at the Charles Koch Institute and Vice President for Foreign Policy at Stand Together, the White House said. In the past, he took positions in several universities and served on non-profit boards, including the Board of Directors of the Center for the National Interest and the Advisory Board of the Policing Project at the New York University School of Law.

Ruger is also a veteran of the Afghanistan War and an officer in the US Navy Reserve, the statement read.

On Tuesday, a senior administration official said Trump would announce a reduction in the military presence in Afghanistan in the coming days. Earlier this month, Trump said he wanted to reduce the level of troops in Afghanistan to 4,000 by US election day, November 3.

The United States signed a peace deal with the Taliban in February that stipulated a phased 14-month troop withdrawal period and a ceasefire between both sides, effectively ending the confrontation which began in 2001. The US-Taliban agreement also envisioned a mutual release of prisoners between the Kabul administration and the militant group, and the beginning of the intra-Afghan talks.

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US Welcomes Announcement on Afghan Peace Negotiations Starting September 12 - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes the announcement that the Afghanistan peace talks will begin this weekend, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Thursday.

"The United States welcomes the announcement that Afghanistan peace negotiations will begin on September 12th," Pompeo said. "The start of these talks marks a historic opportunity for Afghanistan to bring an end to four decades of war and bloodshed."

Intra-Afghan talks in the Qatari capital of Doha will begin on Saturday, September 12, the Qatari Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Pompeo said only through an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led political process can the country see durable peace.

"The people of Afghanistan and the international community will be watching closely. The United States is prepared to support as requested," he added. "The United States recalls the commitment by the Afghan government and the Taliban that terrorists can never again use Afghan soil to threaten the United States or its allies. Now is the time for peace for Afghanistan."

The Taliban on Thursday confirmed that the intra-Afghan peace talks will begin on Saturday. Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem Wardak wrote on Twitter that the opening ceremony of the talks will take place on Saturday, September 12.

Sources in the presidential administration of Afghanistan told Sputnik on Thursday that the delegation of the Afghan government led by Acting Foreign Minister Mohammed Haneef Atmar is expected to depart to Qatar on Friday. Two of the initially-designated delegation members, Ghairat Bahir and Fatima Gilani, are not going to be present at the talks due to foreign assignment for the former and health issues for the latter.

The head of the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, is also scheduled to depart for Qatar on Friday.

The talks will be preceded by an opening ceremony where Abdullah is expected to deliver a keynote address. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will also address the opening ceremony. On the second day, the Afghan government and the Taliban are expected to set the agenda of the talks, laying out their vision of the future peace architecture. No foreign facilitators will intervene in setting the agenda, according to the sources.

The negotiation itself will begin immediately after. It will be focused, among other things, on the ceasefire with the outlook to make it permanent following almost two decades of war and insurgency in Afghanistan.

The talks are also going to address the issue of those Taliban prisoners whose release, as part of the US-negotiated pact between the radical group and Kabul, triggered controversies. This includes the prisoners whose release was objected by third countries, such as France demanding that the insurgents responsible for the killing of French nationals be kept behind bars. The decision on six of such cases will be taken in Qatar, according to the sources. Among the known sideline events are Abdullah's bilateral talks with Deputy Political Director of the Taliban Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and US Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad.

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US Charges Russian National in Alleged Wire Fraud Conspiracy - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged Russian national Artem Mikhaylovich Lifshits for an alleged wire fraud conspiracy to further foreign influence operations in the United States, the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday. "According to the complaint, the subject engaged in a wire fraud conspiracy to further Russian foreign influence efforts and to enrich himself and others," FBI Assistant Director of the Counterintelligence Division Alan Kohler Jr. said in the release. "The FBI will move aggressively to uncover and disrupt any efforts aimed at undermining our democratic institutions." Earlier on Thursday, the Treasury Department designated Mikhaylovich for his alleged ties to the Internet Research Agency (IRA), which has been previously sanctioned by the US government.

Russia has repeatedly denied interfering in the US political system, saying such practices run counter to the principles of the country's foreign policy.

The release said the 27-year-old Lifshits was manager of a group called "Project Lakhta" engaged in operations to interfere in political and electoral affairs in the United States since at least May 2014. The release added that the group tried to obscure its conduct through a number of entities, including the IRA.

Moreover, the release said Lifshits and other members of Project Lakhta conspired together to obtain personal information of US citizens in order to open fraudulent banking accounts and to make cryptocurrency exchanges in the victims' names.

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Twitter to Remove or Label Misleading Election Posts Starting Next Week - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - Twitter plans to begin either removing political and election-related messages that contain false information while flagging tweets that are either misleading or confusing beginning September 17, the company said in a press release on Thursday.

"Starting next week, we will label or remove false or misleading information intended to undermine public confidence in an election or other civic process," the release said.

Political tweets that are considered misleading but fall short of being outright falsehoods will be flagged, with additional context provided, and distribution limited, according to the release.

"Reducing the visibility of Tweets means that we will not amplify the Tweets on a number of surfaces across Twitter. However, anyone following the account will still be able to see the Tweet and Retweet," the release said.

The policy targets several types of political messages that became prominent during the 2016 presidential election: false information on election and voting procedures, disputed information such as unverified claims of vote rigging; and victory claims by a candidate before vote tallies become official, the release said.

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Voters in 6 Key States Say Trump, Biden Mentally Unfit for US Presidency - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - Neither President Donald Trump nor his Democratic opponent Joe Biden possess the mental fitness needed to preside over the United States for the next four years, a majority of voters in six US swing states said in a CNBC/Change Research poll on Thursday.

"The findings in the pivotal states of Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin were released Thursday amid a sustained push by the Trump campaign to portray Biden as incapable of handling the demands of office. Most respondents in those states, which will play a huge role in determining the presidential election winner, do not have confidence in Trump's ability to take on the job, either," a CNBC report explaining the poll said. A 51 percent majority said Trump is mentally unfit to be president, while 49 percent answered that he is fit to hold the job. A similar share, by a 52 percent to 48 percent margin, responded that Biden is also mentally unfit to be president, the report said.

Both candidates did slightly better when voters were asked about the candidates physical fitness. A 52 percent majority said the 74-year-old Trump is physically fit to be president and 54 percent said the same about Biden, who is 77, the report added.

The survey found Biden leading Trump by at least a small margin in all six states.

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US Hopes Germany Will Call Off Nord Stream 2 Project Over Navalny Case - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes Germany will abandon the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project over allegations that Russia poisoned opposition figure Alexey Navalny, US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison said during an event hosted by the Washington Post on Thursday.

"Now we're talking about: will sanctions be right, will the Germans cancel Nord Stream 2. I hope they will but they have to do that themselves," Hutchison said. "I think there are a number of opportunities for all of us to have a collective response and I think we're talking about it now." Hutchison said the United States and its allies are waiting to see how Russia will respond to the incident before taking appropriate action.

On August 20, Navalny fell ill during a domestic flight in Russia. He was initially treated in the Siberian city of Omsk, where the plane made an emergency landing, but was then flown to Berlin once the doctors established he was fit for cross-border aerial transportation.

Last week, the German government said that doctors at the Charite hospital found traces of a nerve agent from the Novichok group in Navalny. Russia said Berlin lacks evidence to back up its allegations and noted that Russian doctors had found no toxic substances.

Russia also requested legal assistance and more information on Navalny's case. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said Berlin could share information about Navalny, but such sharing is a multistage process.

On Monday, the Charite hospital announced that the politician's condition had improved and he was awakened from an induced coma.

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UN Security Council Concerned by Sharp Increase in Attacks on Schools - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, September 10 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council members adopted a statement during a meeting on Thursday expressing grave concern about the significant increase of attacks on schools in recent years which resulted in an alarming number of children being left without quality education.

"The Security Council reaffirms the right to education and its contribution to the achievement of peace and security and expresses grave concern about the significant increase of attacks on schools in recent years and the resulting alarming number of children denied access to quality education," the statement said.

UN International Children's Fund Executive Director said later during the meeting that in 2019 alone, there were 494 verified attacks with one-fifth of them taking place in West and Central Africa. Since the agency started monitoring, more than 13,000 attacks on schools have been reported worldwide.

The Security Council also noted in the statement the disproportionately negative impact of the COVID-19 related school closures on children in armed conflict and those separated from armed groups who are undergoing reintegration assistance.

The UN body further called on countries to facilitate the continuation of education at times of armed confrontation, including through remote learning and the use of digital technology, adding that international support is necessary to promote such efforts.

Russian Deputy Representative to the United Nations Gennady Kuzmin noted that while his country supported the Security Council statement, it wished the document addressed the repatriation of children of foreign terrorist fighters.

"Recently, the Russian Federation has evacuated another group of Russian children from the Syrian conflict zone. We call on all member states to step up their efforts to repatriate children," Kuzmin said. "Children should not suffer because of the unlawful terrorist activities of their parents and guardians."

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US Navy 'Developing Capabilities' to Shoot Down ICBMs From Warships - Admiral

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The US Navy and Missile Defense Forces are developing capabilities to shoot down intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) from warships, Missile Defense Agency (MDA) Director Vice Admiral Jon Hill told a Defense News conference on Thursday.

"[The MDA] is engaged on remote sensor data against an ICBM engaged by a ship," Hill said. "We know we can do that, but we're operating outside our design [parameters]... That's a pretty powerful defense in depth against ICBMs."

The Department of Defense had been allocated sufficient funding by the Trump administration and Congress to carry out the extensive research and development needed to advance the program, Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Policy James Anderson told the conference.

Under the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Trump administration budget submission, the number of ballistic missile defense (BMD)-capable Navy Aegis ships is projected to increase from 48 at the end of FY2021 to 65 at the end of FY2025, the Congressional Research Service reported on August 27.

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Ex-Canadian Finance Minister Violated Elections Act - Federal Regulator

TORONTO, September 10 (Sputnik) - Former Canadian Finance Minister Bill Morneau has been found in violation of the country's elections act, a federal regulatory body said in a ruling on Thursday.

During the federal election campaign in the fall of 2019, Morneau participated in a number of Finance Department-funded events that benefited the Liberal Party of Canada candidates in hotly contested Toronto-area ridings. In Canada, federal ministers are prohibited from using public resources and funds from their departmental budgets to engage in partisan activities.

"Mr. Morneau's failure to exercise due diligence therefore resulted in a circumvention of the rule at section 363 of the Canada Elections Act (the Act), and therefore, a contravention of paragraph 368(1)(a)," the Commissioner of Canada Elections said in the ruling.

The events benefited incumbent Minister of Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand and Michele Fisher, the Liberal nominee from the riding of Dufferin-Caledon who ultimately lost, the ruling said.

The Finance Department contributed \$1,261 worth of commercial value funding for the events, according to calculations by the commissioner.

The former finance minister has been ordered to post a link to the findings and a statement reading "the Commissioner of Canada Elections accepts an undertaking from Bill Morneau in relation to a circumvention of the Canada Elections Act's rules on contributions" on his verified Facebook and Twitter accounts and pay a \$227 fine.

Concurrently, Morneau and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau are both the subjects of a conflict of interest probe by Canada's Ethics Commissioner into their relationship with the embattled WE charity. It is believed that the ongoing scandal forced Morneau's resignation last month.

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US Drug Regulator 'Will Not Cut Corners' in Approving COVID-19 Vaccine - Commissioner

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration will deliver a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine to Americans and not rush one under any influence outside of science, Commissioner Steven Hanh said on Thursday.

Many Democrats have accused President Donald Trump of trying to fast-track the vaccine approval process in order to get one delivered ahead of the November reelection. Trump's Democratic rival Joe Biden has recently urged the regulator agency to maintain transparency and independence.

"We want to be flexible and we want to be responsive, but we will not cut corners. We will follow our rigorous procedures to assess," Hahn said during an interview with the Economic Club of Washington. "I think everybody in America wants a vaccine as quickly as possible but we also want a very effective vaccine, but we also want a vaccine that's safe."

The quest for a workable COVID-19 vaccine has become a politically-charged issue in the United States, with Trump dropping broad hints that there will be one approved before the November 3 presidential election. The president's Democrat rivals have, however, accused him of pressuring relevant agencies such as the FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to cut important corners to get a vaccine out quickly to boost his chance of getting reelected.

The COVID-19 has infected more than six million Americans and killed over 190,000 of them, and Trump's response to the pandemic has become a key issue in the election. His administration is currently working with six trial vaccines for the coronavirus and three have entered the key Phase 3 trial of public testing.

Two other leading US scientists - National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci and National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins - have said there is no certainty that authorities will be able to approve a COVID-19 vaccine in time for the election. Hahn said the FDA had to consider the risk-benefit ratio in accelerating any medicines to the market, particularly during a pandemic.

"We find ourselves in the position that we're accused of either going too fast or too slow or doing too little or too much. I suppose... if we hear criticism from both sides, then we're probably in the right place."

He added, however, that he had "complete and absolute confidence in the scientists at FDA" and their decision-making.

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Trump Extends 'National Emergency' Order Targeting Foreign Meddling in US Elections

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump renewed for one year a 2018 emergency declaration targeting foreign interference in US elections to help prevent foreign powers from meddling in candidates' political campaigns, the White House said in a press release on Thursday.

"The ability of persons located, in whole or in substantial part, outside the United States to interfere in or undermine public confidence in United States elections, including through the unauthorized accessing of election and campaign infrastructure or the covert distribution of propaganda and disinformation, continues to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States," the release said.

The release noted that the proliferation of digital devices and internet-based communications has created vulnerabilities and magnified the scope and intensity of the threat of foreign interference.

The release claimed there is no evidence of a foreign power altering the outcome of any US election, while noting that foreign powers historically sought to exploit the United States' free and open political system.

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US Senate Rejects Republicans' Scaled-Back Coronavirus Relief Bill

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday failed to advance a \$500 billion Republican bill to provide modest relief in response to health and economic hardship caused by the six-month long coronavirus pandemic after their Democrat rivals mustered enough votes to block the legislation.

The Senate voted 52-47 largely along party lines against the legislation, which was already unlikely to win support of the Democrat-majority House.

Democrats say the bill does not do enough to meet key priorities, such as aid for state and local governments and additional federal unemployment benefits.

House Democrats in May passed a \$3.5 trillion relief package, but that legislation has not gained the support of the Republican-majority Senate.

Previous bipartisan efforts have helped US lawmakers pass four phases of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act that have approved roughly \$2.2 trillion to be disbursed as loans and grants to businesses, paycheck protection for workers and personal aid to qualifying Americans.

Both Democrats and Republicans have blamed each other for the drag over the fifth installment of the act, with Trump's rivals wanting a package worth around \$2 trillion versus the about \$500 billion that Republicans are targeting.

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Japan, Israel Helping US More Than NATO Allies in Missile Defense - Pentagon Official

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is more involved with Japan and Israel in co-research and development of missile defense against hypersonic weapons than with some NATO partners in Europe and would like more cooperation from them, Acting US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy James Anderson said on Thursday.

"We are leveraging help from our allies and partners. ... [We have] a close relationship with Japan, Israel and others to maintain these advantages," Anderson told a Defense News conference. "[W]e would like to see some of our NATO allies do more."

Anderson also said that the United States was also looking for more cooperation from its allies in developing its warfighting and missile defense capabilities in space.

"Space is increasingly important. We include that [as] a warfighting domain and part of that is having our partners play a role in that dimension," he said.

In June, Japan's Defense Minister Taro Kono announced his country was cancelling the deployment of two costly land-based US Aegis Ashore missile defense systems aimed at bolstering the Japan's capability against threats from North Korea and would revise its missile defense program.

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Canadian Economy Faces Long Recovery From 'Very Deep Hole' - Central Bank Governor

TORONTO, September 10 (Sputnik) - The Canadian economy faces a long and challenging recovery following the crisis spurred by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem told a virtual panel on Thursday.

"The pandemic has put us in a very deep hole and we still have a long climb ahead," Macklem said.

Canada's central bank chief said while the early stage of the economic recovery has exceeded earlier projections, the economy has hit different segments of the population with varying degrees of severity.

Macklem said the pandemic has disproportionately hit Canadian women and young people.

Employment among young men and women remains 15 percent below pre-pandemic levels - the largest gap among the main demographic groups by a wide margin, according to the latest government data.

Macklem added that an uneven recovery poses a threat to the entire economy.

On Wednesday, the Bank of Canada maintained the target overnight rate of 0.25 percent - the effective lower bound - which has been in place since the onset of the pandemic.

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US Senate Democrats Propose Sanctions Against Russia Over Alleged Afghan Bounties

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - Six members of the Democratic minority in the US Senate introduced a bill on Thursday that mandates President Donald Trump to impose sanctions on any Russian official found guilty of offering monetary awards to Taliban militants for assassinations of American soldiers in Afghanistan.

Sponsors of the proposed legislation in a statement lamented "Trump administration's failure" to respond properly to bounties allegations that surfaced in US media and were rejected by both Russian officials and the White House.

The bill requires the president to certify whether or not the Russian government "offered, ordered, directed, or was otherwise responsible for bounties for the killing of members of the US Armed Forces or members of NATO's Resolute Support Mission."

If the president certifies that the Russian government did so, he is to impose asset blocking and visa ban sanctions on President Vladimir Putin or any other senior government, defense or intelligence official involved in the bounties.

The bill authorizes \$50 million per year for rewards for information on "Russian bounties" and \$30 million annually for Global Engagement Center programming to counter Russian influence in the countries of South and Central Asia. It also requires a report on "the net worth and assets of Vladimir Putin."

In June, the New York Times reported that US intelligence had informed President Donald Trump in a February daily briefing about a suspected effort by Russia to place bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan. Trump previously called the article a hoax, while White House officials and senior US military leaders publicly said that the intelligence was not convincing. Russia denied the claim as another fake story that was part of the political infighting in the United States.

The bill, dubbed the Russia Bounty Response Act of 2020, was introduced by Senator Bob Menendez, Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, joined by Democratic Senators Jeanne Shaheen, Dick Durbin, Richard Blumenthal, Jeff Merkley, and Tammy Duckworth.

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IMF Conducts Virtual Discussions With Argentina on New Program - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is conducting virtual discussions with Argentina over Buenos Aires' request for the new support program, IMF spokesman Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"At the moment, our discussions are taking place online, so I do not have a dates for a physical IMF visit Argentina," Rice said during the virtual press briefing.

Buenos Aires requested a new IMF-supported program very recently, so all sides just began discussions, he added, noting a "very constructive" climate of negotiations.

"We look forward to continue to engage with the Argentine authorities in the period ahead to discuss their plans to strengthen macroeconomic stability, kick start growth and job creation, reduce poverty and unemployment, and, of course, to help Argentina fight the pandemic," Rice said.

The IMF approved in June 2018 a \$50 billion stand-by loan to Argentina and later that year agreed to increase the loan to \$56.3 billion.

Under the administration of former President Mauricio Macri, Argentina received \$44 billion of the IMF loan. The new president, Alberto Fernandez, said that his government would not take the rest of the loan and would review the repayment schedule.

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UNSMIL to Resume Political Talks in Libya - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 10 (Sputnik) - The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) is expected to make an announcement on the resumption of Libyan political dialogue, following a round of consultations among the key stakeholders in Switzerland earlier this week, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"The Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Libya, Stephanie Williams, warmly welcomed the outcomes of the consultations among key Libyan stakeholders that took place in Montreux... between the 7th and 9th of September," Dujarric said. "Building on these and other consultations... the mission will now launch the arrangements needed to resume fully inclusive Libyan political dialogue forum, with an announcement to be made forthcoming." Dujarric also said that during the most recent round of talks, the participants in Montreux shared the view that presidential and parliamentary elections in Libya must be held at the end of the 18-month period.

After the ouster and assassination of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, Libya was engulfed in a brutal conflict and is divided between two centers of power - an elected parliament in the country's east, supported by the Libyan National Army (LNA) and the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in the west.

The LNA is supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, while the GNA is backed by Turkey and Qatar.

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Over Half of World's Tourist Destinations Easing COVID-19 Travel Restrictions - UNWTO

UNITED NATIONS, September 10 (Sputnik) - A majority of the world's tourist destinations - 53 percent - have already eased travel restrictions introduced to contain the spread of the coronavirus disease, which shows a gradual restart of tourism, the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) said in a press release on Thursday.

"Analyzing restrictions up to September 1, the research carried out by the United Nations specialized agency for tourism found that a total of 115 destinations (53 percent of all destinations worldwide) have eased travel restrictions, an increase of 28 since July 19," the release said. "Of these, two have lifted all restrictions, while the remaining 113 continue to have certain restrictive measures in place."

According to the UNWTO, destinations with eased travel restrictions have comparatively low rates of novel coronavirus infection and high or very high levels of health and hygiene infrastructure.

Some 64 percent of those destinations have a high dependence on air transportation for international arrivals, the release said.

Meanwhile, 93 destinations - 43 percent of all worldwide destinations - continue to have their borders completely closed, of which 27 have had their borders closed for at least 30 weeks. UNWTO noted that more than 50 percent of all destinations with borders fully closed are among the world's most vulnerable countries.

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Russia, China to Have Maneuvering Hypersonic Missiles by 2030 - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - Russia and China are both developing new capabilities in hypersonics, intercontinental ballistic missiles and cruise missiles all capable of both hypersonic speeds and maneuvering by 2030, Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Policy James Anderson said at the Defense News conference on Thursday.

"The threat is multi-dimensional," Anderson said. "Certainly the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are developing a lot of capabilities. [Also] Rogue states like North Korea and Iran [are] posing threats to our allies and partners."

The threat of such weapons was growing in complexity in both their sheer numbers and sophistication, Anderson said.

"We are watching this very closely... Our vision is that we will stay ahead of whatever they are working on with respect to the rogue missile threat," he said.

Russia's Tupolev Tu-160 (NATO reporting name Blackjack) supersonic strategic bomber can carry a dozen Kh-16 (NATO designation 'Kickback') nuclear-capable hypersonic aero-ballistic missiles, which have an operational range of 300 kilometers (180 miles), Piotr Butowski wrote last week in Aviation Week & Space Technology.

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US to Conduct Over 40 Flight Tests of Hypersonic Weapons in Next 4 Years - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is going to conduct over 40 flight tests of hypersonic weapons by 2024, Deputy Defense Secretary David Norquist said on Thursday.

"Over the next four years we will fly over 40 flight tests in order to develop and transition of family of hypersonic weapons to our war fighters," Norquist said during Defense News virtual conference.

Since the moment of withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty last year, the US is making "rapid progress" in fielding ground-launch missiles, Norquist said. The

United States has already conducted two initial flight tests of previously banned prototype conventional cruise and ballistic missiles, he added.

The INF Treaty between the US and Russia (initially the Soviet Union) was a hallmark of the detente diplomacy towards the end of the Cold War and guaranteed the nuclear safety of Europe. In 2019, US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the deal despite repeated calls from Russia and the international community to renegotiate and appease. Washington insists that China must join trilateral arms control treaties along with Russia, something Beijing has dismissed, noting that its arsenal and stockpiles are far smaller than US and Russian equivalents.

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Nearly Half of US Voters Expect Trump Win Despite Biden Lead in Surveys - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - A 48 percent plurality of registered US voters expect President Donald Trump to be re-elected despite surveys that consistently show former Vice President Joe Biden with a comfortable lead, a Monmouth University poll revealed on Thursday. "More registered voters think Trump (48%) will win the election rather than Biden (43%) despite Biden's consistent lead in the polls. Among firm Trump supporters, 92% expect their candidate to win and just 2% feel he will lose. Among firm Biden supporters, 80% expect the Democrat to win and 12% think he will lose. Among all other voters, including soft supporters and undecided voters, 43% believe Trump will win and 39% believe Biden will win," a press release summarizing the poll said.

Monmouth attributed the discrepancy to a small but sizable number of voters who expressed suspicion that vote tallies in the November 3 election will be accurate.

One in four voters (24 percent) are "not too confident" and 13 percent are "not at all confident" in how the election will be conducted, the release said.

"We usually focus on the majority's view when describing public opinion, but in this case minority opinion could be sizable enough to have an impact on the election's legitimacy. The question is whether any disbelief in the outcome might lead to other consequences," Monmouth Polling Institute Director Patrick Murray said in the release.

The poll showed Biden with a nine-point lead over Trump (51-42 percent), similar to a 10-point lead recorded in Monmouth's August poll.

National polls, however, are less significant than statewide polls due to the Electoral College format. And Biden is ahead in all of the top seven so-called "swing" or "battleground" states - albeit at least four of those contests are within a 3-percent margin of error - according to an average of the latest polls published on Realclearpolitics.com (RCP). Biden, theoretically, would win by an electoral college landslide if the election were held today according to the aggregate of polls.

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US House Speaker Says Not Ruling Out COVID-19 Aid Package Before November Election

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told reporters on Thursday that she is not ruling out a COVID-19 aid package before the November 3 presidential election.

"No," Pelosi said responding to a question about whether any deal preceding the election is dead.

Pelosi added that she considers the \$500-billion relief package set for a vote in the Senate later on Thursday to be a feigned attempt at action by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

Earlier on Thursday, McConnell said American families will see exactly which Senators want to provide them assistance after the vote.

Congress has so far passed four phases of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, approving roughly \$3 trillion to be disbursed as loans and grants to businesses, paycheck protection for workers and personal aid to qualifying US citizens.

Both Democrats and Republicans have blamed the other for stalling the fifth installment of the CARES Act. Democrats have sought a package worth around \$2 trillion versus the \$500 billion one proposed by Republicans.

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North Korean Focus on COVID-19 Helps Maintain Calm on Border With South - US Commander

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - Tensions along the heavily guarded Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea remain subdued, as the novel coronavirus pandemic forces Pyongyang to concentrate on protecting its population from the deadly disease, joint US-South Korean commander Gen. Robert Abrams said in an interview on Thursday.

"Things right now are generally pretty calm," Abrams said in a virtual interview hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Their military is focused principally on getting their country recovered and to help mitigate the risk of COVID-19."

Abrams said that North Korea is also engaged to recover and rebuild from the effects of three recent typhoons.

Much of Pyongyang's anti-virus strategy focuses on the nation's border with China, which North Korea closed in January 2020, according to Abrams.

"It's understandable. They have a poor health system. Sixty percent of their population is undernourished. They don't have the benefit of capacity and a very large outbreak could be devastating so they've taken those matters into their hands," he said.

Abrams noted that imports from China to North Korea have dropped 85 percent this year due to novel coronavirus-related border restrictions.

North Korea has depended on China for much of the nation's food supply since a devastating famine in the 1990s killed millions.

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US Sanctions 4 Russia-Linked Individuals Over Alleged Election Interference - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed new sanctions on four Russia-linked individuals, including Ukrainian parliament member Andrii Derkach, for allegedly interfering in the US election, the Treasury Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated four Russia-linked individuals for attempting to influence the US electoral process," the release said. "Treasury designated Andrii Derkach (Derkach) pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13848 for his efforts to influence the 2020 US presidential election."

The Treasury Department said Derkach has close connections with Russian intelligence services and engaged in a cover influence campaign focused on cultivating false and unsupported narratives about American officials in the upcoming US election.

Derkach's narratives were pushed in Western media through coverage of press conferences and other news events, including interviews and statements, the release said.

The Treasury Department said the United States has also designated Russian nationals Artem Lifshits, Anton Andreyev and Darya Aslanova for their work on behalf of the previously sanctioned Internet Research Agency.

Russia has repeatedly denied interfering in the US political system, saying such practices run contrary to the principles and practice of the country's foreign policy.

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IMF Supports India's Policy Response to Fight COVID-19 - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) supports India's actions in fighting COVID-19 including its fiscal stimulus targeting workers, IMF spokesman Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"The immediate priority is a coordinated policy response to fight the virus. In this context, we support the government's responses to pandemic, including fiscal stimulus with a focus on low income workers," Rice said during the virtual press briefing.

Fiscal consolidation, monetary easing and other measures are also important, he added.

The severe impact of the global pandemic caused weaker preliminary GDP estimated for the second quarter of 2020 than previously expected, Rice said. The IMF predicts significant downside risks for India due to COVID-19, he noted.

The near-term outlook continues to be "clouded" by the global and domestic slowdown, he added.

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US Oil Output Rose 300,000 Barrels Per Day on Post-Hurricane Rebound - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - US oil output rose by an estimated 300,000 barrels per day last week to reach 10 million bpd as crude production platforms on the Gulf of Mexico were redeployed after being shut down during Hurricane Laura, Energy Information Administration (EIA) data revealed on Thursday.

The EIA estimated a record high crude production of 13.1 million barrels per day in mid-March as the United States stood as the world's largest oil producer. In its latest update for the week ended September 4, the agency cited daily production at 3.1 million barrels below that high. In the previous week to August 29, the EIA estimated oil production at 9.7 millions daily, accounting for outages in the aftermath of Laura as most of the production facilities on the Gulf of Mexico were shut as precaution.

As of Saturday, only 40 of the 643 manned production platforms on the Gulf, accounting for 6.2 percent of capacity, remained idle, the Department of Interior reported.

Laura, one of the strongest US hurricanes in more than a century, made landfall between east Texas and west Louisiana as a Category 4 hurricane on August 26. The storm, which killed at least 25 people and damaged countless property, also scored a near-direct hit on one refinery in Louisiana processing 769,000 barrels per day of crude.

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IMF Ready to 'Redouble Efforts' to Help Lebanon Overcome Crisis - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is ready to significantly increase its assistance to Lebanon in order to help the new government overcome the country's socio-economic crisis, IMF spokesman Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"We are ready to redouble our efforts to help Lebanon overcome the social economic crisis it faces," Rice said during a virtual press briefing.

The IMF is ready to engage with the new government and provide assistance in areas where it can help to face existing challenges that were amplified after the deadly explosion in the port of Beirut last month, Rice added.

On August 4, nearly 3,000 tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate detonated, killing more than 170 people and injuring more than 5,000. The blast triggered a shock wave that destroyed at least half of the city as well as the grain silos storing most of Lebanon's wheat supplies. The explosion has worsened the economic situation in the country that has already seen soaring unemployment and inflation.

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US Relocation of AFRICOM From Germany to Cost \$1Bln - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The US military's relocation of Africa Command (AFRICOM) from Germany to another NATO ally in Europe will cost at least \$1 billion, the Washington Post reported on Thursday.

It cites two defense officials, who on the condition of anonymity told the newspaper that Spain, Italy, Belgium or Britain are under consideration for hosting the headquarters that is in charge of more than 6,000 servicemen operating in Africa.

Retired Army general Carter Ham, who commanded Africom from 2011 to 2013, said that they once estimated costs at about \$1 billion and advised the then Defense Secretary Leon Panetta against leaving Stuttgart.

Changes are now viewed as part of a new strategy prioritizing Russia and China over low-intensity conflicts throughout the globe and a way to punish Germany for not contributing enough to collective defense efforts.

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IMF Has No Date for First Review of Ukraine Program - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) does not have a specific date for the first review of its program with Ukraine, IMF spokesman Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"We continue our engagement with the authorities and discussions on the program, its conditions and commitments are ongoing. I do not have a date for the first review," Rice said during the virtual press briefing.

The IMF spokesman emphasized the importance of Ukraine implementing effective anti-corruption measures to effectuate economic growth.

"Maintaining the independence and integrity of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine, the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office and the High Anti-Corruption Court is key component of structural reforms to unlock stronger growth," Rice said.

In June, the IMF approved an 18-month stand-by agreement for Ukraine with access to \$5 billion. The National Bank of Ukraine said that it had received \$2.1 billion of these funds by June 12.

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US Posts 884,000 Weekly Jobless Claims for Week to Sept 5 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - Some 884,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, unchanged from the previous week, the Labor Department said on Thursday, as the labor market continued to struggle five months into the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending September 5, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 884,000," the Labor Department said in a news release. It revised claims in the previous week to August 29 to 884,000 as well, leaving no change between the two weeks. Continuous claims for the latest week showed filings from 13.39 million Americans, up from the previous week's revised number of 13.29 million.

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

But the economy itself shrank by a record 33 percent in the three months to June, adding to the 5 percent contraction in the first quarter, as business lockdowns forced by the pandemic took a toll on growth.

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US Government Sanctions Liberian Visa Officer for 'Significant Corruption' - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The US government has publicly designated a senior Liberian foreign affairs official for significant corruption in his involvement in immigration processes to the United States, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Thursday.

"Today, I am announcing the public designation of the former Director of Passport and Visas at the Liberian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andrew Wonplo due to his involvement in significant corruption," Pompeo said.

In his official capacity at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2018 to 2019, Wonplo was involved in passport fraud that undermined the rule of law, reduced the Liberian public's faith in their government's management of identification and travel documents and compromised the integrity and security of immigration processes, the statement said.

"[O]nce the Secretary of State designates officials of foreign governments for their involvement ... in significant corruption, those individuals and their immediate family members are ineligible for entry into the United States. ... In addition to Mr. Wonplo, I am announcing the public designation of his spouse, Dennice Wonplo, and their minor children," Pompeo said. The Secretary of State emphasized that the designation reaffirms the United States' commitment to standing with the people and government of Liberia in their fight against corruption. The State Department will continue to use these authorities to promote accountability for corrupt actors in this region and globally, Pompeo added.

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Covid-19 Accelerates Impact of US Sanctions on North Korea - Commander

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The novel coronavirus pandemic has accelerated pressure on North Korea, primarily by slashing imports from China that helped feed and otherwise sustain the isolated nation, joint US-South Korean military commander Gen. Robert Abrams said in an interview with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on Thursday.

"Sanctions historically always take a long time and the effectiveness of sanctions early on were sort of varied," Abrams said. "With COVID-19 that has accelerated the effects of sanctions on North Korea."

Abrams pointed out that the imposition of US sanctions in 2017 led to a 50 percent drop in Chinese imports, only to have imports recover last year. But in January 2020, North Korea closed its borders in when virus threat emerged in China.

Pyongyang established a buffer zone of up to two kilometers along its border and posted guards with "shoot to kill" orders targeting any trespassers, Abrams said.

"COVID-19 has dropped imports from China by 85 percent, so there is a cumulative effect economically of COVID with the sanctions," he said.

Abrams noted that the peninsula remains calm due mainly to North Korea's internal focus on virus-mitigation measures, as well as efforts to recover from three recent typhoons. Once the pandemic ends, Abrams said he anticipates a new push by North Korea to resume negotiations with South Korea, the United States or some combination of the two.

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IMF, Belarus Could Not Overcome Differences on Handling COVID-19 to Secure Emergency Funds

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) could not overcome the differences with Belarus on the country's handling of the novel coronavirus pandemic in order to satisfy Minsk's request for emergency assistance, IMF spokesman Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"Belarus approached the Fund with a request in terms of possible emergency assistance, but no agreement was reached. We have not found ways to breach significant differences about the appropriate response to the present challenges," Rice said during a press briefing.

Rice also denied claims that the IMF tried to force President Alexander Lukashenko to impose strict restrictive measures in Belarus amid the pandemic.

"We did not demand quarantine, isolation and lockdown, but we sought assurances for steps to contain the pandemic in line with WHO recommendations," Rice said.

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US Provided 15,000 Ventilators to 56 Countries Amid Pandemic - National Security Advisor

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has delivered more than 15,000 ventilators to 56 countries as part of its global assistance efforts to counter the novel coronavirus pandemic, White House National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said on Thursday.

"We have also provided more than 15,000 US-made ventilators across 56 countries and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. On average, a single ventilator can provide lifesaving support for up to 18 patients battling the China virus over a six-month period," O'Brien said during a US Export-Import Bank conference.

O'Brien noted that the US government has contributed more than 20.5 billion dollars to aid the global response against the novel coronavirus pandemic, another 4.6 billion dollars were donated by individual Americans, businesses and non-profits.

"These efforts stretch across more than a 120 countries," he said. "They include everything from vaccine and therapeutic development, laboratory and testing capacities, disease surveillance

and contact tracing, expertise and equipment, essential healthcare providers and funding for communication programs to ensure that populations receive critical risk information." O'Brien praised the United States' leadership in international assistance, which represents more than 40 percent of all global health assistance and 30 percent of all global humanitarian assistance.

By contrast, China aid represents less than 2 percent of global health assistance, O'Brien said.

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Trump Says North Korea's Kim Jong Un in Good Health, 'Never Underestimate Him'

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said via Twitter on Thursday that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is enjoying good health and warned against underestimating him.

"Kim Jong Un is in good health. Never underestimate him!" Trump said.

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Seattle Rioter Faces Up to 20 Years in Jail for Arson Attacks on Police - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - A rioter in Seattle, Washington, arrested on charges of throwing Molotov cocktails into two police cars faces a minimum five-year sentence with a 20 year maximum, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"Evidence obtained by law enforcement includes a video of the suspect [Kelly Jackson] throwing one Molotov cocktail into a police vehicle, another video of a glass bottle with a wick, and information that Jackson accessed web-based information on how to construct Molotov cocktails. The second Molotov cocktail was thrown at the windshield of a police vehicle, bounced off, and exploded in flames on the sidewalk," the release said on Wednesday. Arson is punishable by a mandatory minimum five years and up to 20 years in prison. Possession of a destructive device is punishable by up to ten years in prison. The Justice Department said the attacks occurred during a May 30, 2020 riots in downtown Seattle.

At least eight people face federal charges related to the Seattle unrest, including some charged with setting fires at a police station and others carrying Molotov cocktails to nightly protests - and riots - that erupted following the death of African American suspect George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25.

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Pompeo Discusses South China Sea, North Korea With ASEAN Partners - State Department

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his counterparts from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) discussed issues related to the Chinese military buildup in the South China Sea and North Korea's nuclear weapons program during the East Asia Summit this week, State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a press release.

"Secretary Pompeo joined several ASEAN countries and many other partners in raising concerns over the PRC's aggressive actions in the South China Sea," Ortagus said in the release on Wednesday. "He reiterated that the United States, in line with the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal Award, regards Beijing's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea as unlawful."

Ortagus also said Pompeo and his ASEAN counterparts also discussed the controversial national security legislation adopted by Hong Kong and the postponement of elections in the territory.

Pompeo and his partners also discussed the need for North Korea to abandon its nuclear ballistic missile programs in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions, Ortagus said. Moreover, Pompeo affirmed the United States' commitment to partner with ASEAN countries to help in their economic recovery efforts from the impact of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Ortagus said.

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WE Charity 'Winding Down' Operations in Canada After Scandal Involving Trudeau - Statement

TORONTO, September 10 (Sputnik) - The We Charity - an organization at the heart of the scandal that has plagued the government of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau - said in a statement that it winding down its operations in Canada.

Trudeau and current and former members of his cabinet incurred heavy criticism after media revealed close ties between the officials' families and the WE Charity. The government had awarded a \$670-million sole-source contract to administer a government-sponsored student volunteer program.

"It is with great sadness that WE Charity and its Board of Directors announce they are winding down the organization's operations in Canada. The organization will be selling its assets to establish an endowment fund to sustain the charity's existing international humanitarian programs and digitize its Canadian educational resources for long-term access," the statement said on Wednesday.

The restructuring comes as a result of disruptions, including a loss of sponsors, caused by political battles and misinformation that a charity is ill-equipped to fight as well as the strict novel coronavirus-instituted measures in Canada, the statement said.

WE Charity explained that it intends to terminate staff and sell its property in Canada as part of efforts to establish an endowment fund to support other projects worldwide.

At the request of WE Charity's Board of Directors, founders Craig and Marc Kleinberg will also leave the organization upon the cessation of activities in Canada.

Earlier this summer, the independent media outlet Canadaland revealed that Trudeau's mother, Margaret Trudeau, and brother, Alexandre Trudeau, were paid a combined sum of \$258,000 for speaking engagements at WE Charity events. Trudeau's wife Sophie has also participated in a number of WE Charity events around the world and was paid \$1,036 for one event in 2012.

The Kielburger brothers told a parliamentary committee earlier this summer that members of the Trudeau family received upwards of \$380,000 in speaking fees, travel expenses and other reimbursements over several years.

Former Finance Minister Bill Morneau, who faced mounting backlash following his admissions that he accepted expense paid trips and that both of his daughters have relationships with the charity, had previously resigned.

There are currently multiple ongoing investigations of Trudeau and his government. Trudeau is also subject of a conflict of interest probe by the Canada's Ethics Commissioner into his relationship with the WE Charity - the third during his five years in office.

Concurrently, there are a number of parliamentary investigations concerning the awarding of the multi-billion-dollar government ward to the WE Charity that have been halted after Trudeau shut down Parliament until the end of September.

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Saudi Arabia, Bahrain Open Skies to Transit Flights from Israel - White House

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia and Bahrain opened skies to transit flights from Israel and backwards, knocking down a major obstacle to global air traffic in a yet another sign of detente in the Middle East, senior White House adviser Jared Kushner told reporters.

"They agreed to open their airspace not just to flights from Israel to the United Arab Emirates and back, but to all eastward travel," Kushner said Wednesday during a phone briefing.

Israel and the UAE are expected to sign next week in Washington a peace deal that includes an agreement to launch direct air travel between both countries. The first regular flight carried Israeli and American delegations from Tel Aviv to Abu Dhabi over Saudi Arabia, which has so far refrained from establishing formal relations with Israel.

Kushner said that the decision of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain will greatly increase connectivity between various regions by "cutting down a lot of the travel time." Saudis will be able to go to Europe faster by flying over Israel and Israelis will save hours traveling to Asia, and the people from Asia - when flying to Israel, he explained.

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Trump Administration to End COVID-19 Screenings of International Passengers - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration is planning to end its screening of incoming airline visitors to the United States for carriers of COVID-19 starting this coming Monday, CNN reported.

The Trump administration ordered enhanced screenings of passengers arriving from Wuhan, China where there had been an outbreak of the virus, at certain airports within the United States starting in January, the report said citing three officials familiar with the plans.

Since March, the screenings have been directed at international flights from high-risk countries, including much of Europe, China and Iran funneled through 15 designated airports in the United States, the report said.

A Transportation Security Administration (TSA) official told CNN that of the 675,000 passengers screened at the 15 airports, less than 15 individuals had been identified as having COVID-19.

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UK Must Honor Ireland Peace Agreement as Condition for Trade Deal With US - House Speaker

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - US Congress will not approve any trade agreement with the United Kingdom if Brexit harms the Good Friday deal, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a statement.

"If the UK violates that international treaty and Brexit undermines the Good Friday accord, there will be absolutely no chance of a US-UK trade agreement passing the Congress," Pelosi said Wednesday. "The Good Friday Agreement is treasured by the American people and will be proudly defended in the United States Congress."

Pelosi described the 1998 Good Friday Agreement as "the bedrock of peace in Northern Ireland" and said it remained an inspiration for the whole world.

"Whatever form it takes, Brexit cannot be allowed to imperil the Good Friday Agreement, including the stability brought by the invisible and frictionless border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. The UK must respect the Northern Ireland Protocol as signed with the EU to ensure the free flow of goods across the border," she said.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been moving towards a "no-deal" withdrawal of his country from the EU, a process that puts the maintenance of the open border between Northern Ireland, which has remained part of the UK and the Republic of Ireland in doubt.

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Ontario, Quebec Premiers Agree to Combat US Protectionism, Trade Barriers - Statement

TORONTO, September 10 (Sputnik) - The Premiers from the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec discussed US protectionism and novel coronavirus pandemic-induced limitations and agreed to remove barriers to trade, Ontario's government said in a statement.

"[Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Quebec Premier Francois Legault] agreed to collaborate on combating US protectionism, removing trade barriers," the statement said on Wednesday.

The governments of the two provinces will further work together to develop shared principles on the safe and responsible reopening of the US-Canada border and ensure Ottawa has a clear plan before any restrictions are relaxed, the statement also said.

Ford and Legault have been particularly vocal about new tariffs imposed on Canadian aluminum exports by the Trump administration. Ontario's premier has also expressed concern said that steel tariffs could follow the aluminum duties announced last month by US President Donald Trump.

The two premiers have also spoken out about the need to extend the restrictions at the border with the United States for as long as it is necessary.

In the first in-person summit between the premiers since the onset of the pandemic, the two provincial leaders also discussed the economic recovery amid the ongoing pandemic and other areas of shared interest.

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US Revoked Over 1,000 Visas of Chinese Nationals By September 8 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - More than 1,000 visas of Chinese nationals have been revoked to date by the US government as part of the Trump administration's effort to prevent Beijing from using students and researchers to steal intellectual property, technology and other sensitive information, a State Department spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

"As of September 8, 2020, the Department has revoked more than 1,000 visas of PRC [People's Republic of China] nationals who were found to be subject to Presidential Proclamation 10043 and therefore ineligible for a visa," the spokesperson said in the statement on Wednesday.

The spokesperson said the number of high-risk Chinese graduate students and researchers considered ineligible is a small number compared to the total number of Chinese students and scholars allowed to study in the United States.

On June 1, the United States began to implement a presidential measure to restrict the entry of Chinese graduate students and researchers with ties to China's military.

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Trump's Concealment of True COVID-19 Threat 'Historic National Tragedy' - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump's decision to hide the true threat of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) from the US public is a historic national tragedy, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a statement.

"So much of this pain could have been avoided, but President Trump refused to tell the truth or to act to protect the American people," Pelosi said in the statement on Wednesday. "The horrifying toll of Trump's deadly disinformation and negligence in the lives of grieving families and to our economy is a historic national tragedy."

Earlier on Wednesday, audio recordings from US journalist Bob Woodward's interview with the president for his upcoming book "Rage" revealed that Trump in February admitted to downplaying the deadly threat posed by the novel coronavirus.

Trump said he downplayed the threat of the novel coronavirus because he wanted to reduce fear and prevent the country from going into a panic.

The United States has reported over 6.3 million coronavirus cases and more than 190,000 virus-related deaths as of Wednesday afternoon, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

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US-Led Coalition to Defeat Islamic State Gets New Commander - Central Command

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - US Army Lt. Gen. Paul Calvert has taken over from Lt. Gen. Paul White as the commander of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent

Resolve, the US-led coalition to defeat the Islamic State terror group (outlawed in Russia), the Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a press release.

"Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, the military organization to defeat [the Islamic State] in Iraq and Syria, conducted a change of command ceremony in Baghdad [on] September 9, 2020," the release said on Wednesday. "Lieutenant General Paul Calvert assumed command from Lieutenant General Pat White."

CENTCOM chief Gen. Kenneth McKenzie presided over the change of command and expressed his confidence in the new leadership to continue supporting partner forces in their fight for the enduring defeat of the Islamic State, the release said.

"I am confident [Calvert] will continue to build on the progress the Coalition has made, and as we move forward he will remain committed to our mutual goals of the enduring defeat of [IS] and the long-term security, stability, and prosperity of Iraq," McKenzie said.

As a result of partner force success over the past year, the Coalition had transferred sites inside of eight Iraqi bases to full Iraqi government control that uses them to conduct training and daily operations against the Islamic State, the release noted.

In Syria, the Coalition continues to support the Syrian Democratic Forces with advice, specialized intelligence sharing and air support for anti-Islamic State operations, the release added.

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Wall Street Stocks Rebound Wednesday Halting 3-Day Slide

NEW YORK, September 10 (Sputnik) - The slide on Wall Street halted on Wednesday, with the tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite index particularly putting in its best day since April, as investors returned to pick up stocks cheapened by three days of torrid selling.

The Nasdaq closed up 294 points, or 2.7 percent, at 11,141, for its largest gain since a 3.6 percent rise on April 29. The index touched record highs above 12,000 nearly a week ago before losing about 10 percent over the last three sessions.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, rose 67 points, or 2 percent, to close at 3,399, after hitting an all-time high of 3,588 last week.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US stock indicator, gained 440 points, or 1.6 percent, to finish at 27,940, after scaling 29,000 last week.

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Biden Says Trump Minimizing COVID-19 Threat Cost Over 50,000 Lives

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden said President Donald Trump could have saved at least 54,000 lives if he did not downplay the COVID-19 threat.

Earlier, CNN reported, citing audio from prominent US journalist Bob Woodward's interview with the president for his upcoming book "Rage," that Trump in February admitted to downplaying the deadly threat posed by COVID-19. CNN transcribed the recording - the actual audio clip has yet to be posted.

"On the day that we hit 190,000 dead from COVID 19, we just learned from [Washington Post reporter] Bob Woodward he [Trump] knew in January how deadly it was: He knew and played it down. He knowingly and willingly lied to the country for months," Biden said at a rally in Michigan on Wednesday. "If he had acted two weeks sooner, 54 000 lives would have been saved in March and April alone."

Biden accused Trump of failing to do his job on purpose.

"It's beyond despicable, it's a dereliction of duty. It's a disgrace," Biden said.

Later Senate Minority leader Chuck Schumer echoed Biden's criticism in a Capitol Hill press conference and said there was now "damning proof that Donald Trump lied and people died," Schumer stated. He said Trump had treated COVID-19 as a public relations problem rather than a once-in-a-lifetime health crisis.

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US COVID-19 Death Toll Rises Above 190,000 - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The COVID-19 death toll in the United States has surpassed 190,000, while the number of recorded infections has climbed above 6.3 million, the latest data from Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center showed on Wednesday.

The exact death toll now stands at 190,478, while the number of confirmed cases reached 6,351,623, according to the university's data.

The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on March 11. The US remains the worst-hit nation, both in terms of the number of cases and the death toll.

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Kushner Says Possible Sale of F-35s 'Being Discussed' After Israel-UAE Peace Deal

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - The US administration is contemplating a sale of F-35 fifth generation jet fighters to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but will discuss a possible deal with Israel to accommodate its security concerns, senior White House adviser Jared Kushner told reporters on Wednesday.

"Right now it's something that is being discussed," Kushner said during a press briefing. "That's something that we are discussing very seriously. And we will see what happens as we go to consultations with the Israelis, Congress and other partners."

The prospects of a groundbreaking arms deal opened up after the US brokered a peace agreement between two of its major allies in the Middle East. The UAE becomes the third Arab country to normalize relations with Israel after Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994.

When the peace deal was announced, President Donald Trump said that the UAE would like to buy F-35s and the US was reviewing the possibility of selling the aircraft. Israel, the only operator of the F-35 in the Middle East, has been pressing Washington to maintain its qualitative military edge in the region, and the news caused an outcry among its establishment and the press.

Kushner said the US administration would do what it can "to make sure that we accommodate that circumstance."

"President Trump has shown that he understands Israel's security better than any American President in decades, he has been a great friend of Israel, he has made the region safer, he has brought America and Israel closer that they had ever been before," he added.

The signing of a peace deal between Israel and the UAE is scheduled for September 15 in Washington.

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Facebook Creates Instagram 'Equity Team' Amid Offensive Against Hate Speech

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - Facebook said in a press release that it has created an equity team as part of a larger effort to police so-called hate speech on its Instagram subsidiary as posts on racial and social issues increasingly dominate Instagram content.

"The equity team will focus on creating fair and equitable products. This includes working with our Responsible AI team to ensure algorithmic fairness. In addition, they'll create new features that respond to the needs of underserved communities," the release said on Wednesday.

In addition, Facebook said it had updated policies against implicit hate speech, such as content depicting blackface, or stereotypes about Jewish people.

"We also strengthened enforcements against people who make serious rape threats and we'll now disable any account that makes these threats as soon as we become aware of them, rather than just removing the content," the release said.

Facebook and Instagram previously banned 23 organizations, half of which supported white supremacy, as well as QAnon posts, which allegedly promote a conspiracy theory claiming Democrats exploit children.

Facebook's moves reflect a recent trend in which Instagram is increasingly used to raise awareness of racial, civic and social causes, the release said.

The First Amendment of the US Constitution protects the right of Americans to free speech and expression, including speech that may be deemed offensive and hateful.

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Trump Says He Downplayed COVID-19 to Avoid 'Showing Panic'

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump when asked about an audio clip of him downplaying the COVID-19 threat said he wanted to reduce panic.

Earlier, CNN reported, citing audio from prominent US journalist Bob Woodward's interview with the president for his upcoming book "Rage," that Trump in February admitted to downplaying the deadly threat posed by COVID-19. CNN transcribed the recording - the actual audio clip has yet to be posted.

"We do not want to show panic, and that is exactly what I did," Trump told reporters at the White House on Wednesday when asked about the audio tape revealing him downplaying the COVID-19 threat. "You can not show a sense of panic, or you can have bigger problems than you have had before."

Trump noted that he was "very open" with Woodward and other people.

US administration does not want "to instill panic", crying about tremendous problem, Trump added. He repeated his position about prompt actions on closing borders, vaccine research and taking reasonable care to prevent the spread of the virus.

In a final interview in July, Trump told Woodward that COVID-19 had nothing to do with him and was not his fault, placing all blame on China.

The United States has reported over 6.3 million cases of COVID-19 and more than 189,970 deaths caused by the disease as of Wednesday afternoon, according to the Johns Hopkins University.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 10 (Sputnik)

US MILITARY ACTIVITY IN BALTIC, BLACKS SEAS

* Moscow has noted an increased military activity of the United States and its allies in the Baltic region, near the border with Belarus, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Wednesday.

* Russia scrambled a Su-27 fighter jet to intercept a US reconnaissance aircraft over the Black Sea, the Russian Defense Ministry's National Defense Control Center said.

BELARUS DEVELOPMENTS

* A decision on holding a presidential election in Belarus can be made in December or January during a meeting of the People's Assembly, President Alexander Lukashenko said in an interview with Russian broadcasters.

* Belarus has not used the help of reserve law enforcement officers put in Russia for this purpose and, hopefully, will not have to, Lukashenko said.

* Belarusian opposition politician Maria Kolesnikova is suspected of engaging in an attempted coup, her lawyer Liudmila Kazak told Sputnik.

* Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich, a recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature and a member of the opposition Coordination Council's presidium, said that she was not going to leave Belarus.

US-CHINA RELATIONS

* The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has set up a coordinating group to integrate responses to Chinese efforts to steal US intellectual property, undermine the integrity of US elections and conduct other hostile activities, Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf said on Wednesday.

NAVALNY CASE

* The situation with Navalny is not an issue on the German-Russian bilateral agenda, German Ambassador to Russia Geza Andreas von Geyr said after visiting the Russian Foreign Ministry.

* Russia expressed its strong protest over groundless accusations in the case of Navalny to Geza Andreas von Geyr, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* Reports about the alleged poisoning of Alexey Navalny with a new type of the nerve agent Novichok cannot be true because there were no symptoms of poisoning with this substance, Leonid Rink, one of the developers of the chemical warfare nerve agent, told Sputnik.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* The developers of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine for the novel coronavirus are ready to make it available for people all over the world, Russian Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said on Wednesday.

* AstraZeneca's suspension of the novel coronavirus vaccine trials shows the importance of having a package of several vaccines, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.