

02/23/21 Tuesday

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Video: At Least 67 Inmates Dead in Ecuador Prison Riots
by [Mary F.](#)

Violence between rival Ecuadorian gangs is a common occurrence. In December, riots in local jails spearheaded by a gang rivalry left 11 dead and seven others injured.

At least 67 prisoners died on Tuesday during violent riots in three Ecuadorian prisons following clashes between rival gangs, Director of the Comprehensive Care Service for Adults Deprived of Liberty Edmundo Moncayo [revealed](#) at a press conference at the government palace in Quito.

According to the national police, the unrest occurred at facilities in Guayas, Azuay and Cotopaxi. At least eight people were also killed at a detention center in the port city of Guayaquil, police chief Patricio Carrillo confirmed Tuesday, noting that police forces were working on containing the unrest.

"Following the events that took place today at the social rehabilitation centers of Guayas, Azuay and Cotopaxi [the Ecuadorean police] took the situation under control. As of now, forensic experts report over 50 dead inmates," the police said on Twitter.

According to a report by [Anadolu Agency](#), family members of those killed said that inmates from several wards attacked another prison ward where at least 50 prisoners were being held.

In a statement on Twitter, the country's president Lenin Moreno said the riots were caused by "criminal organizations."

"Criminal organizations carry out simultaneous violent actions in several prisons in the country. The Minister of Government and the police are working to retake control of prisons in Guayaquil, Cuenca and Latacunga," Moreno wrote on Twitter.

Alleged videos of the incidents were also shared on social media.

According to a report by the Daily Sabah, this is not the first time that violent riots have broken out in prisons in the South American countries, with previous clashes reported at Cotopaxi prison.

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El Chapo's Wife to be Held Without Bond Pending Trial After International Drug Trafficking Arrest
by [Mary F.](#)

On Monday, Emma Coronel Aispuro, the wife of Sinaloa Cartel leader Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, was arrested at Dulles International Airport outside Washington, DC on international drug trafficking charges.

One day after being arrested in Virginia for alleged international drug trafficking charges, the 31-year-old dual US-Mexican citizen and wife of drug kingpin "El Chapo," was held without bond pending trial.

The judge made the order after Coronel Aispuro's attorney, Jeffrey Lichman, said he would consent to her temporary detention as long as they maintained their right to request a future bond hearing, [Fox News reported](#).

Coronel Aispuro faces a charge of conspiracy to distribute at least one kilogram of heroin, at least five kilograms of cocaine, at least 1,000 kilograms of marijuana and at least 500 grams of methamphetamines for unlawful importation into the US, the Justice Department said in a [Monday statement](#).

The court documents also accuse Coronel Aispuro of conspiring with others to assist Sinaloa Cartel leader Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman in his July 11, 2015 escape from prison in Mexico. Guzman was later rearrested in Mexico on January 16, but Coronel Aispuro is alleged of planning another prison escape before Guzman was extradited to the US in January 2017. Prosecutor Anthony Nardozi accused Coronel Aispuro of "knowing and intending that the substances would be unlawfully imported to the United States," She additionally noted that Coronel Aispuro should remain behind bars because she "worked closely with the command and control structure" of the Sinaloa cartel, Fox News reported.

"The defendant has access to criminal associates who are members of the Sinaloa cartel as well as the financial means to generate a serious risk of flight ... Further, she has no direct ties to the Washington, DC area," Nardozi added.

If convicted, Coronel Aispuro could face 10 years in prison, with a maximum of life in prison, and a \$10 million fine.

El Chapo was convicted on several criminal charges following his 2017 extradition to the US and is currently serving a life sentence in a maximum-security prison in Florence, Colorado.

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'Devil is Already Here': Homegrown California COVID-19 Strain May Be More Infectious, Lethal by [Mary F.](#)

Several COVID-19 variants have been identified since the pandemic first broke out, including a variant called B.1.1.7 first identified in the UK, a variant called B.1.1.7 originally detected in South Africa and a variant called P1, which first emerged in Brazil.

A new COVID-19 variant, first detected in California, may be more contagious than other variants, two new studies reveal. Although the studies have been reviewed by [The New York Times](#), they have yet to be published in scientific journals as they undergo review by public health departments.

The variant (B.1.427/B.1.429) first emerged in California last spring. However, scientists only became aware of the variant in December 2020, according to the Times.

In one of the studies, researchers found that the variant has spread quickly in a San Francisco neighborhood in the past couple of months. The researchers sequenced 630 genomes by January and found that 53% of the coronaviruses belonged to B.1.427/B.1.429.

In a second study, which tracked the variant's spread in San Francisco, showed that people who contracted the variant had twice the typical number of viral particles in their bodies. In addition, the variant was found to be around 40 times more effective at spreading infection through human cells than other variants.

This study also looked at the medical records of 324 people who received care at University of California, San Francisco clinics and found that those with the variant were 4.8 times more likely to be admitted to the ICU and more than 11 times more likely to die than people who had been infected with previous strains. The data was adjusted for age, gender and ethnicity differences.

"The devil is already here," Dr. Charles Chiu, a virologist involved in viral particle study told The Los Angeles Times. I wish it were different. But the science is the science." Chiu also predicted that the strain will account for around 90% of California's infections by the end of next month.

The variant B.1.1.7, which first arrived in the US from Britain, is believed to not only be more transmissible but also more lethal than earlier variants. However, some experts believe that the new California variant is concerning but isn't as troublesome as the B.1.1.7 variant.

"I'm increasingly convinced that this one is transmitting more than others locally," said William Hanage, an epidemiologist at Harvard, who was not involved in the research. "But there's not evidence to suggest that it's in the same ballpark as B.1.1.7."

So far, B.1.427/B.1.429 has emerged in 45 states and several other countries including Australia, Denmark, Mexico and Taiwan. However, the variant has mostly been identified in California. Researchers still remain unclear on whether the variant is more transmissible than others or surged in California because of superspreader events. "Just by random chance, a bad wedding or choir practice can create a large frequency difference," Joe DeRisi, the co-president of the Chan Zuckerberg Biohub, who has been investigating the variant, told the Times.

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'Same Old People': Algerians Take to Streets to Mark Two Years Since Mass 'Hirak' Protests - Videos

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

During Algeria's 2019 Hirak protests, the largest demonstrations were typically held on Tuesdays. While the COVID-19 pandemic put a damper on last year's protests, in 2021 they seem to be far better organized as they attempt to revive the movement.

Two years after Algerians took to the streets in massive numbers to demand then-President Abdelaziz Bouteflika resign, they are protesting once more.

Huge protests erupted in Algiers on Monday, the largest since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, which put a damper on mass organization. The date was exactly two

years since the huge February 22, 2019, protests began that forced [Bouteflika from power](#) after two months of demonstrations.

Like the original “Hirak” (Arabic for “movement”), Monday’s protest was preceded by a smaller demonstration a week prior. According to Reuters, about 5,000 demonstrators protested on February 16 in Kherrata, a town east of the capital of Algiers where the Hirak began in 2019. They chanted “A civilian state, not a military state,” and “The gang must go,” among other slogans. They waved both the national flag of Algeria and the flag of the Imazighen people, who are indigenous to Algeria and the Sahara region and the country’s largest non-Arab ethnic group.

“We came to revive the Hirak that was stopped for health reasons,” a protester named [Nassima](#) [told Reuters](#) last week. “They didn’t stop us. We stopped because we care for our people.

Today, coronavirus is over and we will get the Hirak back.”

Monday’s demonstrations were much larger and saw widespread clashes with police, who set up security checkpoints around the capital and attempted to block the crowds from gathering around the Grand Post Office, the epicenter of the 2019 protests. Demonstrations also took place in Annaba, Oran, Setif and Mostaganem. At least 59 people were arrested across the country, including 26 in Algiers, according to [Agence France-Presse](#).

Ahead of the anticipated mass protests, Algerian President Abdelmadjid [Tebboune reshuffled](#) much of his cabinet, removing the ministers of energy, security and the environment, as well as merging the energy and oil ministries. Several prominent protesters who had been arrested in connection with the 2019 demonstrations were also released. Additionally, Tebboune dissolved parliament to begin the process of new legislative elections. However, with Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad and Justice Minister Belkacem Zeghmati, two of the targets of protests, retaining their posts, some in the streets reportedly saw little substance in Tebboune’s moves. “The reshuffle doesn’t interest me, it’s the same old people,” Zaki Hannache, a 33-year-old activist, told AFP on Monday. “Same thing with parliament, the new ones (deputies) will work, like the current regime, for their own interests, not for the people.”

Tebboune was appointed president after the December 2019 elections in which he ran as an independent, despite having served in several National Liberation Front (FLN) governments, including Bouteflika’s. The FLN has held power since it led the country to independence in the 1954-1962 anti-colonial war. Last month, the office of French President Emmanuel Macron said [Paris would not apologize](#) to Algiers for its 132 years of brutal colonial rule, including the brutalities of the war of independence, but would instead support a “Memories and Truth” commission to promote reconciliation with the past.

After a catastrophic civil war in the 1990s, the FLN re-established control under Bouteflika, who had ruled the country since 1999. While the state of emergency [officially ended in 2011](#) in the wake of protests inspired by the Arab Spring, the prominence of the military and the tendency of an “old guard” to retain positions of power in the name of preserving unity helped drive the 2019 protests, when Bouteflika announced he intended to pursue a fifth term as president.

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Australian Defense Minister Reynolds Hospitalized as 'Precautionary Measure'
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Australian Minister for Defense Linda Reynolds was admitted to a Canberra hospital on Wednesday morning as a precautionary measure, according to a statement from her office. The statement noted Reynolds was taking a period of medical leave following "advice from her cardiologist relating to a pre-existing medical condition." Prime Minister Scott Morrison has sent her his kind regards.

Foreign Minister Marise Payne will take over at the defense ministry until Reynolds returns, according to the statement.

Reynolds' departure comes amid an investigation into the alleged rape of one of her former staffers in her office by a man in 2019.

According to the [Sydney Morning Herald](#), Reynolds has given the Senate conflicting accounts of her response to the event, including whether or not Australian Federal Police were present when she discussed the assault with another minister.

Reynolds, who has held office since 2019 but played a formative role in Australian defense policy for years, was [expected to give](#) a speech on Wednesday in which she would have argued that "Great power competition is increasing, and nowhere more so than in our region," using a term introduced by the Pentagon in 2017 to describe its shift in focus away from the War on Terror and toward confrontation with the rising nations of Russia and China.

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FAA Administrator Warns of New Safety Risks in Aviation System In Wake of COVID-19
Pandemic
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US Federal Aviation Administration Director Steve Dickson said on Tuesday that as society returns to normality, airline safety measures will have to be more proactive about the industry's ability to facilitate the spread of pathogens like COVID-19.

"All these changes are creating a whole new set of stressors that can inject new safety risks into the system," Dickson said at a Tuesday town hall on commercial aviation safety, "and we absolutely cannot afford to be complacent about that."

Some of the challenges he noted include the early retirement of thousands of veteran airline pilots prompted by the industry's sharp decline during the COVID-19 pandemic; the safety risks posed by new aircraft designs and the impact they have on ridership; and the likelihood that international flights will remain uncommon for a long time to come as COVID-19 remains a prominent worldwide problem.

Dickson's words echo [an earlier warning](#) in December 2020, when he opined that the aviation system in place before March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, "is really not there anymore in the same way."

According to data from the International Air Transportation Association ([IATA](#)) [released earlier](#) this month, 2020 saw a 65.9% decline in global air travel as compared to 2019, with international traffic down 68.1% and overall air miles down by 75.6%. Domestic decline was lower, at 48.8%, as many governments shut down international air traffic in an attempt to limit the spread of COVID-19, which can be contagious for two weeks before visible symptoms appear.

After airline travel declined to a trickle in early 2020, airlines began slashing jobs and thousands opted to take severance and [early retirement packages](#), including 17,000 employees and 2,000 pilots at Delta Airlines.

However, airline safety has also led to a decline in flights, beginning with the [Boeing 737 MAX](#) aircraft that suffered several deadly crashes due to a corner-cutting decision by the manufacturer in reaction to the installation of more powerful engines on the wide-body planes. The aircraft was grounded for nearly two years by the FAA for an investigation before being allowed to resume commercial flights in December of last year.

More recently, a Boeing 777 saw its engine nearly fall apart shortly after takeoff on Saturday, [catching fire](#) in a harrowing flight that fortunately landed safely in Colorado. The FAA has [ordered new inspections](#) of 777s, and Boeing has recommended the aircraft using the engine type in question be grounded.

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US Capitol Police Chief Testifies FBI Report Warning Danger of 'War' on January 6 Never Reached Him
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Despite his far-reaching testimony about the police force's response to the January 6 insurrection, Steven Sund, the since-resigned chief of US Capitol Police (USCP), questions remain about the extent to which his own officers cooperated with the crowd in breaching the legislature.

Sund, who was chief during the January 6 insurrection by supporters of then-US President Donald Trump, [told Congress during](#) a public hearing on Tuesday that he never received a key FBI intelligence report about the violent intentions of members of the crowd.

"That information would have been helpful," Sund told a joint investigation by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and the Senate Rules Committee on Tuesday.

Sund said he only learned after the attack that the FBI's field office in Norfolk, Virginia, had predicted the crowd of Trump supporters would commit "war" during their huge rally in Washington, DC, on January 6.

'Stop the Steal'

Prior to the riot, thousands of participants had attended a rally in front of the White House hosted by Trump that aimed to "Stop the Steal," furthering Trump's claims that his loss in the November 2020 presidential election was due to fraud.

At the rally, [Trump urged his followers](#) to march to the Capitol and “fight like hell,” promising he would join them in convincing Congress to halt its certification of the election results, a process already underway. While Trump didn’t accompany them, some 8,000 people quickly descended on the Capitol and overwhelmed parts of the police line.

“When the group arrived at the perimeter, they did not act like any group of protestors I had ever seen,” Sund told lawmakers. He [resigned the day after](#) the attack. “No single civilian law enforcement agency - and certainly not the USCP - is trained and equipped to repel, without significant military or other law enforcement assistance, an insurrection of thousands of armed, violent, and coordinated individuals focused on breaching a building at all costs,” Sund said. Indeed, among those who stormed the legislature were many [radical elements](#), including neo-Nazis, “Three Percenter” and “Oath Keeper” militia members, as well as former and currently serving members of the US military, who were seen deploying military tactics such as [the “Ranger file.”](#) a technique used by US Special Forces as they prepare to breach a building, along with other militant tactics.

Army Help Rebuffed Over ‘Optics’

Sund also sought help from the National Guard a total of six times before and after the insurrection. However, he told lawmakers Tuesday that in the days prior, then-House Sergeant-at-Arms Paul Irving was concerned about the “optics” of soldiers outside the Capitol and referred him to then-Senate Sergeant at Arms Michael Stenger, who similarly refused the request. However, Stenger advised Irving to seek information about how quickly guardsmen could be deployed if requested. [Both figures denied](#) Sund had made the requests during their Tuesday testimony; they have both since resigned.

However, over at the Pentagon, even more gum was being placed in the works. Maj. Gen. William J. Walker, the commanding general of the District of Columbia National Guard, told the Washington Post that he was required to seek a [“concept of operation” approval](#) before even a tiny number of guardsmen would be dispatched - a standard that effectively guaranteed an emergency deployment would be impossible.

The reason for this, Pentagon officials [told the Post](#), was again a question of optics. One Trump appointee at the Pentagon told the paper the military had “learned its lesson” from the disastrous way the June 2020 Black Lives Matter [protests were crushed](#) by the guard and would be “absolutely nowhere near the Capitol building” because “we don’t want to send the wrong message.”

When Walker began receiving Sund’s urgent pleas, the first of which came at just 1:09 pm on the 6th, he immediately relayed them to the Pentagon, which delayed for 75 minutes, only approving the request at 3:04 p.m. However, the troops only arrived more than two hours later, after the insurrectionists had breached the Capitol, dispersed Congress, killed a USCP officer, built a gallows outside, looted the building, and been driven out by USCP.

Unanswered Questions of Officer Collusion

Sund’s written testimony did not cover a vital aspect of the insurrection, which the corporate media has likewise been wont to ignore in its framing of the event: potential collusion between Capitol Police officers and the rioters.

[As Sputnik reported](#) while the event was still unfolding, several videos filmed and posted on social media at the Capitol appear to show USCP officers fraternizing and even helping the Trump supporters to enter the building.

One scene shows a man snapping a selfie with an officer; another shows officers pulling away barricades as the crowds rush past them; a third shows the narrow doors on the West Terrace being thrown open as officers stand aside, limply telling the rioters they aren't supposed to enter the building.

In another video, a USCP officer wearing Trump's trademark red "Make America Great Again" ballcap coordinates with several rioters outside, who escort him into the building. He is seen a few minutes later leading a group of nearly a dozen riot gear-clad officers out of the building, through the throngs of people attempting to storm it.

However, at other points along the line, USCP officers and those from the DC Metropolitan Police Department who joined them engaged in physical combat with the rioters before deploying both pepper spray and tear gas in order to clear the area.

In the aftermath of the riot, USCP investigated 35 of its officers for their actions during the event, with six of them being [suspended without pay](#) last week, including the one who snapped a selfie and another who reportedly helped guide the mob around the building.

In addition to the USCP officer who died, four of the rioters also died in the attack, including one woman, 35-year-old Air Force veteran Ashli Babbitt, who was shot and killed by a USCP officer as she attempted to force the Senate chamber doors open. At least two USCP officers have also died by suicide since the insurrection.

In the days after, Trump was impeached for a second time and charged with inciting the uprising, although he was acquitted by a minority in the Senate trial earlier this month.

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'You're Breaking the Internet': US Senator Chided for Wearing 'Dangerous Creature' Shirt in Chamber

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US Congress has been criticized for what some consider to be an antiquated dress code, requiring women's dresses or tops to conceal their shoulders, and men to wear suits and ties. When US Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) came to preside over the legislature's upper chamber on Tuesday, she was wearing a hot pink sweater with the words "Dangerous Creature" emblazoned across the front.

The 44-year-old openly-bisexual lawmaker is known for her flashy fashion in the normally-drab legislative chamber, from [colorful wigs](#) to bold colored dresses, each of which got the internet talking. This time, however, it seems netizens went a bit further, hailing her for the fashion statement and passing around a link to order the \$115 garment.

"You're breaking the internet!" Sen. Mitt Romney (R-UT) can be heard telling the Arizona lawmaker in a comment picked up by her microphone during a roll-call [vote to confirm](#) Linda Thomas-Greenfield to be US ambassador to the United Nations.

"Good!" Sinema replied. It's unclear what specific message she was attempting to send by wearing the shirt.

However, at present Sinema is mostly a danger to [attempts to add](#) a \$15 an hour minimum wage provision to US President Joe Biden's COVID-19 relief bill. The measure is up for a vote later this week, but Sinema and another centrist Democrat, West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, are opposed to its inclusion. In the 100-person Senate, Democrats have only the narrowest of majorities with 50 lawmakers from their party; in the event of a tie, Vice President Kamala Harris, also a Democrat, would cast the tie-breaking vote.

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Expanding Horizons - Political Cartoon

Although former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is no stranger to the writer's workshop, the two-time first lady is now dipping her toes into new, uncharted waters - those of the nonfiction variety.

Clinton and longtime friend, author Louise Penny, will be joining forces to pen an international political thriller novel titled "State of Terror" that will arrive on bookshelves in October, it was [announced Tuesday](#).

A synopsis of the yet-to-be published book states that the novel will follow a "novice secretary of state" who happens to join the administration of a rival. The thriller will follow the individual as they investigate a "deadly conspiracy" amid a series of terrorist attacks that "throws the global order into disarray."

While it's safe to say Clinton will definitely lean on her own political undertakings, it's anyone's guess how much of her experience will make it into the book, and if readers will be able to pinpoint any hidden gems.

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Fauci: CDC May 'Soon' Issue New COVID-19 Guidance for Those Fully Vaccinated
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

At present, the US' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is urging individuals who have been fully vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes COVID-19, to adhere to the same rules as those who have not been vaccinated. Rules include social distancing, avoiding crowds and wearing a mask, among other suggested protocols.

Anthony Fauci, one of the US' top health experts on the pandemic, recently revealed that the CDC may "soon" release a new set of guidelines for individuals who have received both doses of the currently available COVID-19 vaccines.

The health professional told CNN's ["New Day"](#) host Alisyn Camerota that the CDC will likely issue its new guidance after agency officials "look at the data" and develop a "recommendation based on the science."

Fauci, who also serves as Biden's chief medical adviser, indicated "common sense" would suggest that fully vaccinated individuals would not have to follow such "stringent" preventative health measures.

"When you say, 'well, wait a minute,' if I'm fully vaccinated and my daughter comes in the house and she's fully vaccinated, do we really have to have as stringent the public health measures than you would if it was a stranger who was not vaccinated and you were not vaccinated? Common sense tells you that," Fauci said. "In fact, you don't have to be as stringent in your public health measures. But what we want, we want to get firm recommendations from the CDC, which I believe will be coming soon."

"They started off with an important recommendation and I believe others will be coming," he added, touching on the CDC's early [February update](#) that stated fully vaccinated individuals do not have to quarantine if they come in contact with someone who was exposed to the virus.

"I believe you're going to be hearing more of the recommendations of how you can relax the stringency of some of the things, particularly when you're dealing with something like your own personal family when people have been vaccinated," he continued.

Fauci did not specify when said guidelines would be issued by the US health agency, but did note that it would be "forthcoming pretty soon."

[Latest figures](#) provided by the CDC indicate that more than 44.5 million Americans have received their first dose of either the Moderna or Pfizer vaccines, with nearly 20 million being given both doses.

Pharmaceutical companies Moderna and Pfizer are the only providers with an approved COVID-19 vaccine at the moment. However, medical company Johnson & Johnson may soon become the latest to join the list, as its candidation is due to be reviewed by the US Food and Drug Administration advisory committee on Friday.

Unlike vaccines provided by Moderna and Pfizer, the Johnson & Johnson shot only requires one dose.

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'They Engage in Attacks Nonstop': Ted Cruz Blames Media 'Trump Withdrawal' for Cancun Backlash

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Hours after Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) was spotted last week leaving the frozen Lone Star State in favor of Mexico's warmer environment, the lawmaker was widely condemned for ditching Texans in the middle of a major crisis that forced hundreds of thousands of residents to go without electricity or water for days.

After having initially claimed the ill-advised getaway was requested by his young daughters, Cruz recently fired back and said that the media was to blame for the backlash he endured after images surfaced of him at the airport.

In a [Monday interview](#) with conservative radio host Dana Loesch, who previously served as the spokesperson of the National Rifle Association, Cruz accused the media of suffering from

“Trump withdrawal,” a condition he says fueled [widespread criticism](#) over his trip to Cancun, a popular resort area in Mexico that borders the Caribbean Sea.

“I will say, to venture into practicing medicine, that I actually want to diagnose the media. The media is suffering from acute Trump withdrawal, where for four years every day, they could foam at the mouth and be obsessed with [former US President] Donald Trump, and now that he has receded from their day-to-day storyline, they don't know what to do with themselves,” Cruz said after engaging in a joke about him being able to control the weather.

“So, the media obsession with the fact that I took my family to the beach last week was a bit much,” the senator added. Although Cruz later stated he was just “trying to be a dad,” the Texas lawmaker added the trip “was dumb to do because it gave the knuckleheads ammunition to launch attacks and engage in ridicule.”

“That's what they do. They engage in attacks nonstop,” he stressed, before calling on the focus to instead be shifted toward the causes of the [Texas crisis](#), which at its height saw millions of residents go days without electricity or water as much of the state was hit with extremely low temperatures. To date, dozens of residents have died, some from carbon monoxide poisoning as others have frozen to death.

Cruz echoed his statements later Monday during an interview with Fox News' Sean Hannity, who has largely framed Cruz's trip as a “quick dropoff” and “escort” of his young daughters. However, it's worth noting that Cruz was [actually scheduled](#) to stay in Mexico through the weekend, and only returned sooner after public backlash over the trip.

During a [Tuesday interview](#) on the conservative “Ruthless” podcast, Cruz revealed that his wife, Heidi, was “pretty pissed” about how group text messages with her neighbors were [leaked](#) to The New York Times. Those messages saw Cruz's wife remark how their house was “freezing” and even included an invitation to join their trip.

The latest developments over Cruz's Mexico trip came as United Airlines announced late last week that it was investigating who [leaked details](#) of the lawmaker's return flight to Texas. Sharing such information is prohibited.

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Video: Tiger Woods Hospitalized After Severe Car Accident, Police Say No Evidence of Impairment

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Professional golfer Tiger Woods was in Los Angeles, California, for the annual Genesis Invitational golf tournament at the Riviera Country Club, according to TMZ.

Woods was hospitalized early Tuesday after being involved in a serious single-car accident in the Los Angeles-area that saw law enforcement officials use emergency tools to remove him from his vehicle.

[A release](#) from the California's Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department states that the accident unfolded at approximately 7:12 a.m. local time, near the Rolling Hills Estates and Rancho Palos Verdes. Woods was the only passenger in the vehicle.

"Mr. Woods was extricated from the wreck with the 'jaws of life' by Los Angeles County firefighters and paramedics, then transported to a local hospital by ambulance for his injuries," the police statement reads. It was later clarified by officials at a news briefing that the so-called "jaws of life" package was not used, with first responders instead using an axe and a Halligan tool.

The accident was described as a "roll-over traffic collision." Woods, who was conscious and wearing a seatbelt when emergency officials arrived at the scene, was taken to the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center.

Mark Steinberg, Woods' agent, [told TMZ](#) that the champion golfer sustained multiple injuries to his leg, and is currently in surgery. Daryl Osby, the chief of the LA County Fire Department, told reporters at the Tuesday briefing that Woods had serious injuries to both of his legs, and that he was not airlifted from the scene.

Although the cause of the accident has not yet been determined, a law enforcement [source informed](#) Bill Melugin, a correspondent for local station Fox LA, that there is nothing "salacious" about the crash, and that officers are solely investigating a "bad traffic accident" at the moment. A source for the [LA Times](#), also indicated that Woods was driving at high speeds and lost control of his vehicle while "crossing the center divider."

Alex Villanueva, the sheriff of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, told reporters that there was no evidence of any impairment. He also indicated that a second accident occurred shortly afterward that involved onlookers. No injuries were reported.

An investigation is currently being carried out by the sheriff's department's Lomita Station. An official report on the Tuesday crash may be released within the next several days by investigators.

Woods was previously involved in a pair of accidents in Florida in 2009 and later in 2017. His 2017 accident led to his arrest in Jupiter, Florida, after officers found him asleep in the driver's seat. Woods later said the incident was caused by a reaction to prescribed medications.

Top-ranked golfer Justice Thomas addressed reports of the car accident and told reporters that he felt "sick to my stomach," as he was also "worried" for Woods' kids. He added, "It hurts to see, now one of my closest friends get in an accident and I just hope he's alright."

Former US President Donald Trump also issued a statement calling on Woods to "get well soon."

In follow-up remarks to Fox News, Trump reflected on the day he awarded Woods the Presidential Medal of Freedom in May 2019 and said he had "no doubt" the golf legend would recover from the accident.

"It's just tragic, tragic," [Trump said](#) of the accident. "He's overcome a lot, he's had an incredible life and he's going to continue to have an incredible life, but now he'll recover from this."

Earlier, Woods was spotted [in photos](#) with former Miami Heat basketball star Dwyane Wade and actor David Spade while out on the green in the Sunshine State.

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Senate Confirms Linda Thomas-Greenfield as US Envoy to United Nations

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, former assistant secretary of state for African affairs in the US Department of State's Bureau of African Affairs, previously drew criticism from Republican senators who accused her of "cheerleading" and "embracing the Chinese Communist Party" after she referred to Beijing as a "strategic adversary."

With a Tuesday afternoon vote of 78-20, the US Senate voted to confirm Thomas-Greenfield as the new US ambassador to the United Nations.

Thomas-Greenfield, who began working under the State Department almost 40 years ago, [delivered remarks](#) last month stating that, if confirmed, she would engage in "people-to-people diplomacy" to counter China's so-called global agenda.

"When America shows up — when we are consistent and persistent — when we exert our influence in accordance with our values — the United Nations can be an indispensable institution for advancing peace, security, and our collective well-being," she said in a written statement read aloud during the January 27 confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee.

Her provided stance appeared to align with US President Joe Biden's commitment to rebuilding relationships and agreements lost in recent years. Within the past several weeks, the US president has rejoined the [Paris Agreement](#), UN Human Rights Council and UN World Health Organization, which former US President Donald Trump withdrew the US from just last year. China's \$1 trillion 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, which seeks to deepen economic relations between Asia, Africa and Europe, as "a win-win-win situation" for the US during a 2019 speech at Savannah State University's Confucius Institute.

She [also testified](#) during a 2019 US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations hearing that the US role in Africa is "to ensure that they have the capacity to strike and negotiate better deals with the Chinese." Republican Sens. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Ron Johnson (R-WI) pressed the US diplomat on her remarks regarding Beijing, with the latter lawmaker asking for her opinion on why the US and China have not officially entered into a new Cold War.

Thomas-Greenfield described China as a "strategic adversary" whose ruling party is a threat to the values and security of the US and its neighbors. She emphasized that in her speech, she was speaking of the importance to preserving the US influence in Africa while being realistic about deals between Beijing and African nations.

She noted that Africa was previously "sort of a pawn in the Cold War, and my conversation there was to say that Africans can no longer allow themselves to be a pawn."

Cruz [stated there](#) was increasing concern over "a pattern of Biden administration nominees of consistently moving towards and embracing the Chinese Communist Party."

"This speech is cheerleading for the Chinese Communist Party," the Texas senator argued, referring to her 2019 statements.

"It was not my intention, nor do I think that I cheered on the Chinese Communist Party," she replied. "This is one speech in my 35-year career, and I do regret that speech."

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US Treasury Nominee: Providing Pandemic Relief to 'Poorest Countries' Critical to National Security

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Prior to being selected as US President Joe Biden's nomination for deputy treasury secretary, Nigerian-American economic adviser Adewale "Wally" Adeyemo notably served the first president of the Obama Foundation, a nonprofit established by former US President Barack Obama, in 2019.

During his Tuesday appearance before the Senate Finance Committee, Adeyemo was asked for his opinion on possibly allocating Special Drawing Rights - the supplementary foreign exchange reserve currency used by the International Monetary Fund - for nations struggling amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

The 39-year-old Treasury department-nominee expressed to lawmakers that he views the pandemic as the most urgent threat to US prosperity.

"We need to be sure that countries around the world are put in a position to deal with the pandemic and its results," the economic adviser [said](#). "Providing financial resources to some of the most poorest [sic] countries in the world is going to be critical to our national security if we seek to make sure that COVID-19 isn't something that continues to affect us".

The December 2020 'Least Developed Countries Report' from the United Nations' Trade and Development Body [warned](#) that "more than 32 million of the world's poorest people face being pulled back into extreme poverty" due to the novel coronavirus.

According to Adeyemo, it is imperative that the US does not ignore the contagious disease and allow it to spread.

If confirmed by the US Senate, Adeyemo would serve as deputy to US Treasury Secretary [Janet Yellen](#), who secured a bipartisan 84-15 Senate confirmation vote [last month](#). The No. 2 treasury department role requires one to weigh in on a number of US economic matters, including COVID-19 relief, support to foreign countries and government sanctions.

Adeyemo also spoke about Washington's approach to Beijing and other so-called foreign threats in his [prepared testimony](#), asserting the "need to work with Congress and strategically use the Treasury Department's tools to protect our citizens from threats, foreign and domestic." "Treasury's tools must play a role in responding to authoritarian governments that seek to subvert our democratic institutions; combating unfair economic practices in China and elsewhere; and detecting and eliminating terrorist organizations that seek to do us harm," his prepared testimony read.

Senate Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden (D-OR) [applauded Adeyemo](#) Tuesday, noting that he has spoken to the 39-year-old nominee about the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the "existential threat of climate change, and taking new approaches to address racial disparities baked into our economic policies."

Adeyemo appears to have bipartisan support from the committee, as Sen. Mike Crapo (R-ID), ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, [spoke optimistically](#) of the nominee on Tuesday.

"COVID relief is just one example of an area where the deputy secretary has played an active role in the past toward bipartisan solutions, and I look forward to working with you, Mr. Adeyemo, to achieve that same result this time as we move forward," the Idaho senator said.

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Texas Woman Alleges Price Gouging in \$1 Billion Class Action Suit Against Power Retailer by [Evan Craighead](#)

Texas resident Akilah Scott-Amos told Reuters earlier this week that her power bill with Houston-based electric company Griddy exceeded \$11,000 for this month alone.

Comparatively, the 43-year-old was paying \$34 during the same period in 2020.

After experiencing more than a \$9000 increase in her own power bill between February 13 and February 19, Mount Belvieu, Texas-resident Lisa Khoury has since moved to take legal action against provider Griddy Electric LLC, according to a lawsuit filed Monday in Houston.

The proposed class-action lawsuit seeks more than \$1 billion in compensatory and punitive damages for customers impacted by what Derek Potts, an attorney representing Khoury, believes is "predatory pricing" amid the recent bouts of extreme winter weather in Texas.

"At this point we don't know how many people might be affected, but there are likely thousands of customers who've received these outrageous bills," Potts [told The](#) Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

"A class action will be the most efficient and effective way for Griddy's customers to come together and fight this predatory pricing."

The court filing accuses Griddy - which offers wholesale electricity at variable rates for \$9.99/mo. - of violating Texas' Deceptive Trade Practices-Consumer Protection Act's [clause](#) regarding "taking advantage of a disaster declared by the governor."

Indeed, US President Joe Biden [approved](#) Governor Greg Abbott's Texas Emergency Declaration on February 14, and later issued [partial approval](#) to the Major Disaster Declaration, granting "Individual Assistance and Public Assistance" to only 77 of the 254 counties requested by Abbott.

However, it remains to be seen if Griddy violated the law in its recent whole electricity rate charges, which changes with the market rate.

Griddy spokesperson Lauren Valdes has slammed the lawsuit as "meritless," as customers agreed to such charges as part of their variable-rate plans.

"We understand our customers' frustration. However, Griddy passes through the wholesale electricity price to customers without mark-up. The prices charged are the direct result of the non-market prices ordered by the [Public Utility Commission of Texas] last week. The lawsuit is meritless and we plan to vigorously defend it," [she told](#) The Dallas Morning News.

Griddy also encouraged customers to ditch them amid the high energy charges, but many were ultimately stuck with the service and wholesale prices that skyrocketed to \$9 a kilowatt-hour -

300 times higher than its normal wholesale price, according to the company's February 18 [news memo](#).

It's worth noting that due to its wholesale business model, Griddy only receives \$9.99 from the customer.

For now, Texas has issued a moratorium on power shut-offs due to one's inability to pay their electricity bill.

"This pause will give [utility providers] time to address the electric and power billing challenges that Texans are seeing," Abbott [said Sunday](#), stressing that addressing electricity hikes was a top priority. "We will not end the [legislative] session until the State of Texas, and all its power generation facilities, are fully winterized so this doesn't happen again."

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RPT: REVIEW - Biden, Trudeau Look to 'Build Back' US-Canada Relations

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik), Michael Hughes - US President Joe Biden and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in their first official bilateral meeting, as they vowed to cooperate on a range of security, health and climate issues, seemed eager to get beyond tensions lingering from Ottawa's battles with the previous administration in Washington. Before Biden took office the US and Canadian governments were at odds in both substance and style - especially on trade matters - with Trudeau often finding himself the target of then-President Donald Trump's wrath. In 2019, the New York billionaire called Trudeau "two-faced" after video surfaced of the prime minister mocking Trump on the sidelines of a NATO summit. During the height of the tariff war in 2018 Trump in a twitter storm called Trudeau "dishonest and weak."

OTTAWA WELCOMES THAW

The question remains as to whether the relationship is headed for a substantial improvement or simply a cosmetic overhaul. Biden's rhetoric might not be as bellicose as his predecessor's, but many of the White House's policies are no less problematic for Canada's economy.

The Biden administration pulled the plug on construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, for example, and a new "Buy America" executive order likely has Ottawa concerned, especially considering the US market represents about 75% of Canadian exports.

These topics were conspicuously absent from the day's proceedings. In the 2,500-word joint statement released after the talks, "trade" is mentioned once and in the context of China's alleged unfair practices.

Regardless of the real policy differences that remain between the United States and Canada, Trudeau could hardly contain his relief over the recent changes in Washington.

"US leadership has been sorely missed over the... past years," Trudeau told reporters ahead of the virtual meeting on Tuesday.

In a joint statement at the end of the day entitled "Roadmap for a Renewed US-Canada Partnership," Trudeau even endorses the US president's clunky campaign slogan, "Building

Back Better," which always implied that Biden was the man for the job to reverse Trump's MAGA approach.

The roadmap said it is in Washington and Ottawa's best interests to "revitalize" the alliance. In addition to the \$2 billion in bilateral trade, the roadmap hails the "unique bond" and values the two countries share, a sentiment echoed by Biden in the post-meeting presser.

"The United States has no closer and no more important friend than Canada. Our nations share a close geography and history that will forever bind us together, but our values are even more consequential," Biden said on Tuesday.

GLOBAL HEALTH, ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Another theme the two leaders hit on was that the United States and Canada were going to improve cooperation on solving problems that are global in nature, such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, which the two leaders said was their "top priority," according to a White House fact sheet.

In addition, both leaders throughout the day underscored the importance of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and its agencies.

"For both our nations, getting COVID-19 under control at home and around the world is the immediate priority. And we committed to work together to help prevent future biological threats by strengthening the World Health Organization," Biden said during Tuesday's press conference.

The two leaders, according to the joint statement after the meeting, agreed to support global affordable access to and delivery of COVID-19 vaccines, including through the COVAX Facility. Biden at the joint presser also said the two countries have "doubled down" on efforts to tackle climate change.

"Now that the United States is back in the Paris Agreement, we intend to demonstrate our leadership in order to spur other countries to raise their own ambitions," Biden said. "To that end, we're launching a high-level Climate Ambition... Ministerial and to align our policies and our goals, and to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050."

SECURITY

Biden and Trudeau vowed to tackle a range of regional and global security challenges their countries face, from military upgrades to cross-border crime.

The leaders agreed that the United States and Canada would work to modernize the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and expand dialogue on continental security and arctic governance. The two countries, in addition, will partner against the spread of weapons of mass destruction and boost cooperation to counter China's influence.

"Coming on the heels of the G7 meeting last Friday it was an opportunity for Prime Minister Trudeau and I to explore our bilateral partnership, to reinforce and help drive issues of concern in our hemisphere and globally, that includes coordinating our approaches to better compete with China and to counter threats to our interests and values," Biden said.

The US and Canada, he added, will work together until detained Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Koving are released by China.

In terms of other mutual priorities, the two leaders committed to launch mechanisms to address cross-border crime and racism. Additional shared challenges, according to the roadmap, include illegal cross-border flows of firearms, drugs, organized crime, and human trafficking.

The two leaders discussed their shared concern about Russia's alleged mistreatment of opposition figure Aleksey Navalny, allegations that Moscow has repeatedly denied. They also discussed Ukraine and reviewed the situations in Venezuela, Myanmar, Iran, Yemen, and the Middle East, according to the joint statement.

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US Golf Legend Tiger Woods in Stable Condition With Serious Injuries to Legs - Fire Chief

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US golf legend Tiger Woods has serious leg injuries but is in stable condition after he rolled his vehicle several times in a single vehicle incident in Southern California, Los Angeles County Fire Department Chief Daryl Osby said in a press conference.

"[Woods at scene of incident listed] as stable condition with serious injuries," Osby said on Tuesday. "He was conscious... It was brought to my attention that he had serious leg injuries." Osby clarified that the 45-year-old Woods did not have any life-threatening injuries.

Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva said there is currently no evidence Woods was impaired at the scene of the incident, however, he mentioned evidence shows that he was going at "greater speed than normal" downhill on a road and hit a curb, causing his vehicle to hit a tree and roll multiple times.

Woods has won five Masters Tournaments, his last win in 2019, and four PGA Championships. He has also won three US Open championships.

Woods is tied in first for the most number of PGA tour wins, which stands at 82.

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Biden, Canada's Trudeau Agree to Counter Chinese Influence, Modernize NORAD

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden after a virtual meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said both leaders agreed to coordinate on numerous mutual concerns, such as countering Chinese influence, modernizing the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), and tackling climate change.

"We... agreed to modernize [NORAD]," Biden said during a press conference at the conclusion of the meeting on Tuesday. "We will launch an expanded US-Canadian dialogue to cover issues related to continental security, economic and social development and arctic governance."

Biden added that the United States and Canada will expand coordination on countering China's influence.

"Coming on the heels of the G7 meeting last Friday it was an opportunity for Prime Minister Trudeau and I to explore our bilateral partnership, to reinforce and help drive issues of concern in our hemisphere and globally, that includes coordinating our approaches to better compete with China and to counter threats to our interests and values," Biden said on Tuesday, adding that the bilateral meeting was very productive.

Biden said the United States will work with Canada to free two Canadians currently detained in China.

The United States and Canada also agreed to launch forums to tackle mutual issues concerning cross-border crime and climate change, Biden said.

The climate change forum will be a high-level ministerial that will work toward aligning bilateral policies and goals, which includes achieving net zero emissions by 2050, Biden added.

The two leaders also agreed to work together to prevent biological threats by strengthening the World Health Organization, cooperating with global partners against the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and to work closely to strengthen supply chain security.

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US, Canada Agree to Launch Forums on Cross-Border Crime, Climate Change - Biden

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States and Canada have agreed to launch forums to tackle mutual issues concerning cross-border crime and climate change, US President Joe Biden said after a virtual bilateral meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

"We also doubled down on our efforts to tackle climate change... we're launching a high-level climate ambition ministerial to align our policies and our goals and to achieve net zero emissions by 2050," Biden said in a press conference on Tuesday.

Biden also said he and Trudeau agreed to re-establish a cross-border crime forum.

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Canada's Central Bank Does Not Anticipate Full Economic Recovery Until 2023 - Governor

TORONTO, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Bank of Canada anticipates that the Canadian economy will continue to experience the lingering effects of the downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic until 2023, Governor Tiff Macklem said.

"It will be some time before we see a complete economic recovery. The Bank's latest forecast doesn't anticipate economic slack being fully absorbed until into 2023," Macklem said during a virtual event on Tuesday.

The governor emphasized that the post-pandemic economy will be different, with digitalization and automation bringing about structural change to the Canadian economy - a Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Macklem also warned that, accordingly, not all jobs will return in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The Bank of Canada will keep the interest rate at its effective lower bound of 0.25 percent until the 2 percent inflation target is met and sustained, which, according to the bank, is not projected to happen until 2023.

However, the governor stressed that labor market recovery cannot be solely achieved through monetary policy and that the government must ensure that Canadians are ready to participate in an evolving economy.

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US, Canada to Modernize NORAD, Expand Dialogue on Arctic Governance - Biden

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States and Canada will work to modernize the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and launch expanded dialogue on continental security and Arctic governance, President Joe Biden said following bilateral talks with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

"We... agreed to modernize [NORAD]," Biden said during a press briefing at the conclusion of the meeting on Tuesday. "We will launch an expanded US-Canadian dialogue to cover issues related to continental security, economic and social development and arctic governance."

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US, Canada Agreed to More Coordination to Counter China's Influence - Biden

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States and Canada have agreed to expand coordination on countering China's influence, President Joe Biden said after a virtual bilateral meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

"Coming on the heels of the G7 meeting last Friday it was an opportunity for Prime Minister Trudeau and I to explore our bilateral partnership, to reinforce and help drive issues of concern in our hemisphere and globally, that includes coordinating our approaches to better compete with China and to counter threats to our interests and values," Biden said on Tuesday, adding that the bilateral meeting was very successful.

Biden added that the United States will work with Canada to free two Canadians currently detained in China.

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NASA Seeks Proposals to Demonstrate Low-Emission, Electric-Powered Aircraft - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - NASA said in a press release that it has begun soliciting proposals for demonstrations of electric aircraft propulsion technology that could someday reduce climate-altering emissions from aircraft.

"The demonstrations will help rapidly mature and transition integrated Electrified Aircraft Propulsion (EAP) technologies and associated EAP vision systems for introduction into the global fleet by 2035," the release said on Tuesday.

NASA noted that EAP concepts are rapidly emerging as potentially transformative solutions to improve the environmental sustainability of the next generation of subsonic aircraft.

Studies have shown that EAP can reduce energy use, carbon and nitrogen oxide emissions and cut operating costs, the release said.

The technology is applicable to turboprop aircraft, regional jets and single-aisle aircraft used for short flights, the release added.

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US, Japan Join Annual Computer-Based 'Resilient Shield' Missile Defense Drill – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US and Japanese forces will hone tactics and skills needed to integrate defenses against ballistic missiles in a joint computer-based exercise dubbed Resilient Shield 2021 this week, the Defense Department said in a release.

"Resilient Shield is an annual computer-based Fleet Synthetic Training-Joint (FST-J) exercise focused on Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD), designed to test US Naval tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) against potential regional threats while ensuring Japanese and US forces are well-rehearsed in executing those TTPs," the release said on Tuesday.

Resilient Shield 2021 is specifically focused on maintaining and improving missile defense operations of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, Japan Air Self-Defense Force, and joint US forces in the Indo-Pacific region, the release added.

More than 77 Japan and US commands will participate in the February 22-26 exercise, according to the release.

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Serbian Faces Charge of Using Crypto Scheme to Swindle US Investors - Justice Dept.

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - A 45-year-old Serbian resident of New York, Kristijan Krstic, has been charged with hatching a bogus cryptocurrency scheme using two fraudulent online investment platforms to solicit some \$7 million from unsuspecting Americans, the US Department of Justice said in a statement.

"As alleged, Krstic convinced US investors to pour millions of dollars into fraudulent cryptocurrency schemes through misrepresentations and false statements, and then ran off with their money," Acting US Attorney for the Eastern District of New York Seth DuCharme said in the statement on Tuesday.

According to the charge, Krstic induced US-based investors to purchase securities in the form of investment contracts in two fraudulent digital-asset investment platforms, "Start Options" and "B2G," between 2017 and 2018.

The statement said that Krstic and others in his scheme represented to potential investors that a deposit in B2G "open[ed] a door to all the curtains inside Aladdin's cave. Dollars buy B2G; B2G tokens can be exchanged back into dollars, or for Euros, or for other national fiat currencies. B2G holdings can be traded for original Bitcoin or other altcoins."

In reality, the money sent by investors in Start Options and B2G was never invested as promised, and instead funneled to a Philippines-based financial account and digital-currency wallet and to a US-based promoter of the fraud, the statement said.

"Subsequently, the US-based promoter transferred approximately \$7 million in investor funds from B2G and Start Options to Krstic, and Krstic thereafter stopped responding to all communications and absconded with those investors' funds," the statement added.

If convicted, Krstic faces up to 20 years' imprisonment, according to the Justice Department.

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Texas Governor Welcomes ERCOT Directors' Resignations, Pledges Inquiry - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Four members of the board running the Texas electric power grid have resigned after the long and widespread energy cuts during the recent winter storm and Governor Greg Abbott has welcomed their departures and promised a full inquiry into the failures.

"The lack of preparedness and transparency at ERCOT [Electric Reliability Council of Texas] is unacceptable and I welcome these resignations," Abbott said in a statement on Tuesday. "The state of Texas will continue to investigate ERCOT and uncover the full picture of what went wrong."

Earlier on Tuesday, ERCOT announced that four unaffiliated directors serving on its governing board - Chair Sally Talberg, Vice Chairman Peter Cramton, Finance and Audit Committee Vice Chairman Terry Bulger Human Resources and Governance Committee Chairman Raymond Hepper - were resigning effective on Wednesday.

"ERCOT ...provides notice of the resignation of four Unaffiliated Directors from the ERCOT Board of Directors and the withdrawal of one Unaffiliated Director candidate from consideration for approval by the Public Utility Commission of Texas," the power utility said. Last week, Texas experienced a heavy winter storm that seriously damaged local water infrastructure systems and left millions of residents without power and water amid sub-zero temperatures as most of the state's electricity grid failed.

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Supply Chain for US Military Industrial Base 'Weak', Not 'Robust' - Gen. Hyten

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John Hyten said during a virtual panel discussion that he is concerned the US military industrial base has a weak and non-resilient supply chain.

"My concern is the health of our industrial base because right now our industrial base is not healthy and COVID has not helped it... the supply chain is weak and we have to take a hard look at that because without that kind of supply chain we cannot move nimbly, quickly, we cannot stay ahead of the threats that will continue to morph, and we're going to have a hard time building affordable capabilities in order to do that," Hyten said during a discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies on Tuesday.

Hyten said the US supply chain is not just about producing gloves and masks, but it is also critical for acquiring materials needed for weapons systems and development.

Hyten also said that the United States currently does not have a "robust, resilient" supply chain. US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer in earlier remarks said he has directed several relevant Senate committees to start drafting bipartisan legislation to outcompete China on economic and tech matters, including the production of semiconductors, adding that the United States must stop depending on foreign sources, which is a spot in US national security.

Last July, former US Defense Undersecretary for Acquisition Ellen Lord said the United States has a vulnerability to China as the world's top producer of rare earth materials needed to manufacture electronic components.

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Microsoft Supports Mandatory Disclosure of Cyberattacks - President

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Microsoft President Brad Smith told a US Senate panel that he supports an initiative to introduce a mandatory requirement for companies to disclose information to the authorities about cyberattacks they are exposed to.

"I think the time has come to go in that direction... I think we can find a way to move forward this year," Smith said during a hearing before the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. "I would perhaps use the word notification rather than disclosure. We should notify someone... I think, a part of the US government that would be responsible for aggregating threat intelligence and making sure that it is put to good use to protect the country and for that matter people outside the country."

Smith suggested applying the potential requirement to tech sector companies and coupling it with "some kind of liability protection that will make people more comfortable with doing this." Another idea voiced at the hearing was to make the disclosure confidential to lower commercial risks for affected companies.

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Canada Negotiating With India's Serum Institute for More AstraZeneca Vaccines - Minister

TORONTO, February 23 (Sputnik) - Canada is negotiating with the Serum Institute of India to obtain additional doses of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine, Procurement Minister Anita Anand said.

"We... are engaged with the Serum Institute of India for doses in addition to the 20 million that we have under contract with AstraZeneca," Anand told reporters on Tuesday.

The procurement minister also confirmed that Canada's initial order of 20 million AstraZeneca vaccine doses will be supplied from the United States.

Despite inking deals with numerous vaccine manufacturers, the Trudeau government has faced sharp criticism for a muted vaccine rollout program that has been labeled a failure by opposition parties and the majority of Canadians, according to the latest polls.

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US Jury Declines to Indict Police Officers in Death of Daniel Prude - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - New York Attorney General Letitia James said a grand jury has decided not to indict the Rochester police officers with charges related to the death of Daniel Prude, an African-American man who died while in police custody last year.

"A grand jury has voted not to indict any police officer on charges related to the death of Daniel Prude," James said via Twitter on Tuesday. "My office concluded there was sufficient evidence surrounding Mr. Prude's death to present the case to a grand jury, and we presented the most comprehensive case possible."

James said the jury's decision must be respected even though it is devastating.

Current laws on the use of deadly force have created a system that has failed Prude and many others before him, revealing that serious reform is needed in the criminal justice system as a whole, James added.

However, James said she will pursue a multifaceted approach to address the issues that have prevented prosecutors from holding officers accountable when they improperly use deadly force.

In September, the Rochester Police Department released body camera footage taken on March 30 by officers who apprehended Prude as he ran naked through the streets at night. Prude's family had called 911 saying he was going through a mental health emergency.

The video footage shows that Prude complied with the officers' orders, but started to shout and spit once he was handcuffed. The officers placed a spit bag over his head and pinned Prude to the ground. Prude vomited and appeared lifeless about two minutes later. According to Prude's family, he died of asphyxiation.

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US Missile Defense Focused on N. Korea, But Iran Represents Growing Concern - Gen. Hyten

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US missile defense systems is currently focused on North Korea, but Iran is gaining attention at the Pentagon as Tehran continues to progress with its missile development program, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John Hyten said during a virtual think-tank event.

"Our national missile defense capability is clearly focused on North Korea right now, not on China, Russia, and Iran. We're starting to look hard at Iran because Iran continues to build missiles in a significant way and we have to be able to respond to that," Hyten said during a discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies on Tuesday.

Hyten pointed out that the United States is not in a good position with respect to missile defense given that China and Russia have made significant investments in missile technologies.

The United States must take a hard look at the best way to counter those threats on an entire defense and defeat structure, Hyten said, adding "We're doing that, we're not ignoring that problem."

The Defense Department will soon begin a congressionally-mandated review of the US integrated air missile defense capabilities that may dictate future investments in missile defense, Hyten said.

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Microsoft President Blames Russia Intelligence Agency for SolarWinds Hack

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Microsoft President Brad Smith told a US Senate panel there is substantial evidence that a Russian intelligence agency was involved in the massive SolarWinds hacking attack and there are no leads that would incriminate other suspects.

"I do think we can say this. At this stage we have seen substantial evidence that points to the Russian foreign intelligence agency. And we have found no evidence that leads us anywhere else," Smith said in a testimony to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

US officials have said they agree that Russian hackers are likely behind a massive cyberattack that targeted at least nine federal agencies and 17,000 private companies. The suspects reportedly embedded malware in SolarWinds updates and patches to penetrate the networks in search for sensitive data. Russia has denied the allegations.

"We will wait for the rest of formal steps to be taken by the government and others. But there is not a lot of suspense at this moment," Smith said.

President and CEO of the CrowdStrike cybersecurity company George Kurtz agreed that there is no information available to him that would suggest that suspicions against Russia are incorrect.

"We are aware that the US government has stated this threat actor is likely of Russian origin. While we are currently unable to corroborate that finding, we have no information to suggest it's incorrect," he said during the Senate hearing.

Smith, whose company analyzed the attack in great detail, estimated that at least a thousand very skilled, capable engineers participated in it.

"We haven't seen this kind of sophistication matched with this kind of scale," he said.

Smith denounced the attack as an indiscriminate "act of recklessness" without "clear analogy or precedent." He called for attribution and accountability for the culprits.

"The world relies on the patching and updating of software... for everything. For physical infrastructure, for hospitals, roads, airports, because they are all run on software. To disrupt, to damage, to temper with that kind of software updating process is my opinion to tamper with what is in effect the digital equivalent of our public health service. It puts the entire world at a greater risk," he said.

The White House confirmed on Monday that it is weeks away from responding to the SolarWinds attack.

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China Condemns Canadian Parliament's Call to Declare Treatment of Uyghurs Genocide

TORONTO, February 23 (Sputnik) - China condemns the Canadian parliament's call on the Trudeau government to declare Beijing's actions with respect to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province genocide, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin said.

Canada's House of Commons adopted the motion in 266-0 vote on Monday, with Foreign Affairs Minister Marc Garneau abstaining on behalf of the government. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and more than 60 members of the governing Liberal Party were absent from the vote.

"In total disregard of facts and common sense, the Xinjiang-related motion passed by Canada's House of Commons has deliberately smeared China and seriously violated international law and basic norms governing international relations, and grossly interfered in China's internal affairs. The Chinese side strongly condemns and firmly opposes that and has lodged solemn representations with the Canadian side," Wenbin said on Tuesday.

Wenbin emphasized that China's activities that are at the heart of Western criticism are part of its counter-radicalization programs conducted in accordance with United Nations norms and standards. Wenbin added that any activities in Xianjing province are China's sovereign affair and called on Ottawa not to interfere.

Despite the overwhelming parliamentary support, the difficulty in enforcing the motion and the Trudeau's previous comments suggest swift action on the motion is unlikely. Trudeau has previously cautioned against liberally using the word "genocide," saying that it is a term guided by strict international guidelines and that misuse of it would weaken the designation.

Following the vote, Garneau said that Canada takes allegations of genocide very seriously but called for an international investigation into the matter.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) -

IRAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

* The recent agreement between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) may facilitate a smooth return to the "previous situation" while also creating a more favorable atmosphere for diplomacy, IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi said in Tuesday.

* Iran should clarify the presence of traces of nuclear material found at undeclared facilities, Grossi said.

* The United Kingdom, France and Germany expressed regret over Iran's limitation of transparency in its nuclear program, saying Tehran's actions were in violation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

* The United States is calling on Iran to immediately cooperate with the IAEA on the alleged presence of undeclared nuclear material, US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said.

US RESPONSE TO SOLARWINDS HACK

* The United States will respond to the SolarWinds hacking attack within weeks, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

* The Biden administration is preparing sanctions against Russia over allegations related to the SolarWinds hack and poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, the Washington Post reported on Tuesday, citing officials familiar with the matter.

UK-EU RELATIONS

* The UK government has agreed to push the ratification deadline for the post-Brexit deal with the European Union back to April 30 from February 28 after the bloc asked it for more time, the minister for the Cabinet Office said on Tuesday.

PUTIN-LUKASHENKO TALKS

* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on Tuesday discussed over the telephone with Russian President Vladimir Putin bilateral defense cooperation, the state-run Belta news agency reported, citing the presidential office.

US ECONOMY

* The Federal Reserve expects to keep US interest rates low until inflation exceeds 2.0 percent over considerable period of time, Fed Chairman Jay Powell said on Tuesday.

* US GDP growth is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels by the first half of 2021, Powell told the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee.

* The US economic outlook remains highly uncertain, with recovery appearing uneven and far from complete, despite progress in vaccinations for the COVID-19, Powell said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

* The first batch of the Russian coronavirus vaccine, Sputnik V, was delivered to San Marino on Tuesday, the Russian embassy in the Southern European microstate said.

* Mexico received the first batch of the Sputnik V vaccine against COVID-19 early on Tuesday, a day before the scheduled start of the vaccination with the Russian shot.

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US to Consider Measures Targeting Ugandan Security Forces - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will consider targeted options against Uganda's officials linked to abuses against opposition during the January election, State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Tuesday.

"We will consider a range of targeted options to hold accountable those members of the security forces responsible for these actions," Price said during press briefing.

Price accused Uganda's government of election irregularities and abuses against opposition and civil society members.

"We strongly urge independent, credible impartial and thorough investigation into these incidents," he said.

In January, Uganda conducted an election where President Yoweri Museveni was declared the nation's leader. Opposition leader Robert Kyagulanyi, better known as Bobi Wine, disputed the results as fraudulent. On Monday, he announced the withdrawal of his case from the country's highest court.

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US 'Deeply Troubled' by Arrest of Opposition Leaders in Georgia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US administration is deeply concerned over the arrest of opposition leaders in Georgia, State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Tuesday.

The United States is deeply troubled by the arrest of opposition leader Nika Melia and other members of the opposition in Georgia," Price said.

Price stressed that Washington is concerned about political developments in Georgia and called on all parties to exercise restraint and to avoid any actions or rhetoric that can lead to escalation of tensions or result in violence.

The spokesperson also urged the nation's government to act in accordance with its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Price also said that Washington is watching the situation in Georgia closely.

Earlier in the day, police stormed the opposition United National Movement (UNM) party office in Tbilisi and detained its leader, Nika Melia, and more than a dozen other activists. Georgia's opposition parties and their supporters have taken to the streets to protest the detention.

Prior to this detention, Melia was briefly arrested for leading riots and anti-Russian protests back in June 2019 and was on a \$9,063 bail. Melia was forced to wear a monitoring bracelet but removed it publicly during another wave of opposition protests, which erupted in November 2020 in non-recognition of the general election results. The move prompted a court to revise the conditions of Melia's release and impose a new bail, which he has refused to pay.

On February 18, then-Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced his resignation, citing his differences with the team members over Melia, whom the Tbilisi court ordered to arrest for failing to pay bail. Gakharia said the detention of the opposition figure could have exacerbated the already tense political situation in the country.

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US Indicts Citizen for Backing Islamic State Terror Group - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - A US grand jury indicted Mohamed Suliman, who was arrested by Turkey during an unsuccessful bid to cross into Syria, on charges of supporting the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia), the Justice Department said Tuesday.

"Suliman, 33, a US citizen, left Gainesville, Florida, travelled to Turkey, and attempted to enter Syria illegally in 2014 in an effort to join and support ISIS [Islamic State]," the release said.

Suliman was subsequently extradited to the United States.

Suliman booked a one-way flight from Florida to Alexandria, Egypt, with multiple stops, including Istanbul, where he departed from his itinerary and traveled to the Turkish-Syrian border, according to court documents cited by the Justice Department.

He admitted in an earlier interview with the FBI that he sought to join the Islamic State in Syria, according to the release.

The period marked an Islamic State offensive that peaked with the terrorist group controlling much of Syria and Iraq.

The US scheduled Suliman's arraignment hearing for March 3. If convicted, he faces a maximum 20-year prison sentence and \$250,000 fine, according to Justice.

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RPT - US 'Deeply Troubled' by Arrest of Opposition Leaders in Georgia - State Dept.

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Price also urged the nation's government to act in accordance with its transatlantic aspirations.

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US Insists That Iran Cooperates With IAEA Without Delay - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on Iran to immediately cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on alleged undeclared material, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"We also know that the IAEA continues to investigate a number of serious outstanding issues related to potential undeclared nuclear material in Iran," Price said. "We insist that Iran cooperate with the IAEA to resolve these issues without further delay."

Price added that Washington will be in close consultation with the IAEA board of governors to discuss appropriate action in support of the agency's efforts.

IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi said earlier on Tuesday that Iran should clarify the presence of traces of nuclear materials found at undeclared facilities.

At the beginning of February, media reported that IAEA inspectors found radioactive traces at two Iranian facilities, sparking concern over possible undeclared nuclear-related activities. The samples were taken during the IAEA inspection carried out in the fall, according to the reports. The IAEA has not reportedly informed the member states about its findings in Iran, and, in line with the existing procedures, the organization is currently asking Iran to provide an explanation.

Grossi visited Iran over the weekend to discuss Iran's decision to limit IAEA inspections of its nuclear sites. Iran had threatened to suspend all inspections by February 23 if the US sanctions against the Islamic Republic were not lifted by Monday.

Iran and the IAEA were ultimately able to strike a temporary deal, according to which Tehran will continue to fully implement the Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA past February 23, although in a limited capacity.

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. The agreement required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief, including lifting the arms embargo five years after the agreement's adoption. In 2018, the United States withdrew from the JCPOA and re-imposed sanctions against Iran, prompting Tehran to largely abandon its obligations under the accord.

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 Man Admits Guilt in Scheme to Fleece COVID-19 Aid for \$1Mln - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - A 46-year-old man in the US state of Wisconsin pleaded guilty to a single count of bank fraud for stealing more than \$1 million from a federal program to prevent layoffs during the COVID-19 crisis, the Justice Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

"As part of his guilty plea, [Thomas] Smith admitted that he fraudulently sought over \$1.2 million in PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] loans through applications to an insured financial institution on behalf of eight different companies. According to his plea agreement, Smith caused fraudulent loan applications to be submitted that made numerous false and misleading statements about the companies' respective payroll expenses," the release said.

Smith, age 46, pleaded guilty today to one count of bank fraud and is scheduled to be sentenced June 2, according to the Justice Department.

The PPP in the \$3 billion CAREs Act provided loans to business facing closure due to the pandemic. The program converts a portion of the loans used to keep paying employees who would otherwise be furloughed to government grants.

The latest \$1.9 billion pandemic relief package now moving through Congress would extend the program.

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US Golfing Star Tiger Woods Injured in Serious Single Car Roll-Over Collision - Sheriff

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US golfing legend Tiger Woods has been injured in a serious single vehicle roll-over accident and has been taken to a local hospital, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said on Tuesday.

"On February 23, 2021, at approximately 7:12 AM, LASD responded to a single vehicle roll-over traffic collision on the border of Rolling Hills Estates and Rancho Palos Verdes... the driver and sole occupant was identified as PGA golfer, Eldrick 'Tiger' Woods," the sheriff's office said in a press release.

The release said Woods' vehicle sustained serious damage and he had to be taken out of the vehicle with the "jaws of life" rescue equipment that is used in extremely serious incidents. Woods was taken to a local hospital to treat his injuries, the release said without disclosing the condition of his injuries.

Woods' agent Mark Steinberg said he suffered multiple leg injuries and is currently in surgery.

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US Senate Leader Schumer Seeks Spring Vote on Legislation to 'Outcompete' China

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Tuesday said he has directed several relevant committees to start drafting bipartisan legislation to outcompete China on economic and tech matters, including the production of semiconductors.

"Today on our caucus call I directed the chairs and members of our relevant committees to start drafting a legislative package to outcompete China and create new American jobs...Our intention is to put this legislation on the Senate floor for a vote this spring," Schumer said in a press conference.

Schumer said the package will seek to make investments to strengthen the US semiconductor industry in order to stop depending on foreign sources, which is a weak spot in US national security.

Moreover, the package will also seek to end China's unfair trade practices by strengthening other areas in the US tech industry, such as artificial intelligence and 5G, among others.

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US Chicken Firm Pleads Guilty to Price Fixing, Receives \$107M In Fine - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - A large US chicken producing company has pleaded guilty to charges of price-fixing in an antitrust investigation and has received a \$107 million fine, the Department of Justice announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"Pilgrim's Pride Corporation, a major broiler chicken producer based in Greeley, Colorado, has pleaded guilty and has been sentenced to pay approximately \$107 million in criminal fines for its participation in a conspiracy to fix prices and rig bids for broiler chicken products," the Justice Department said.

According to the plea agreement entered in the US District Court in Denver, possibly starting in 2012 and continuing at least into 2017, Pilgrim's participated in a conspiracy to suppress and eliminate competition for sales of broiler chicken products in the United States that affected at least \$361 million in its sales of products, the release said.

"These criminal acts cheat American workers and consumers while harming competitive markets. This ongoing investigation has yielded charges against 10 individuals for their efforts to illegally manipulate broiler chicken prices," Washington Field Office Assistant Director Steven D'Antuono said in the release.

The US District Court accepted Pilgrim's guilty plea and sentenced the company to pay a criminal fine of \$107,923,572, the Justice Department said.

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US 'Deeply Troubled' by Arrest of Opposition Leaders in Georgia - State Dept.

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Canadian, Australian Leaders Agree to Ensure Web Giants, Local Creators Revenue Sharing

TORONTO, February 23 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Australian counterpart Scott Morrison agreed on the need to ensure more equal sharing of revenues generated by web giants with local creators and media, Trudeau's office said on Tuesday. "The prime ministers noted the growing cooperation between Canada and Australia on the regulation of online platforms. They agreed to continue coordinating efforts to address online harm and ensure the revenues of web giants are shared more fairly with creators and media," the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement.

The two leaders also discussed the fight against the novel coronavirus pandemic as well as the ongoing constitutional crisis in Myanmar.

Canadian officials have vowed to make web giants, including Facebook, pay additional funds to support local creators and media, who claim they are being undercut by international social media platforms, which allow the sharing of content without necessarily bringing benefit to creators.

Last week, Facebook removed posts of Australian news outlets and government pages amid an ongoing battle over Canberra's media bargaining law. Canberra dubbed the social network's move as a threat, a "wrong" and "heavy-handed" step. In recent weeks, Facebook has also temporarily limited the amount of political content that appears in the news feeds of users in Canada, Brazil and Indonesia.

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Four UN Employees Safe After Deadly Attack on Convoy in DRC That Killed Italian Ambassador

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - The World Food Program (WFP) said in a statement on Tuesday that four of its staff members that survived the attack in the Democratic

Republic of the Congo (DRC), in which three people were killed, including the Italian Ambassador, are safe.

On Monday, two UN vehicles carrying seven people to a WFP school feeding program in the east of the DRC were attacked by an armed group. Luca Attanasio, the Italian Ambassador to the DRC, and two other members of the delegation were killed in the incident.

"The four other passengers in the group - all WFP staff - are safe and accounted for," the WFP said. "They include WFP Deputy Country Director in DRC, Rocco Leone, WFP School Feeding Program Assistant, Fidele Zabandora, WFP Security Officer, Mansour Rwagaza, and WFP Driver, Claude Mukata."

Unidentified militants stopped the UN vehicles just over an hour after they left the city of Goma for Rutshuru on Monday morning. The militants killed the WFP driver and forced the remaining passengers at gunpoint into the surrounding bush.

Following an exchange of fire, Attanasio and his security escort Vittorio Iacovacci, also an Italian Embassy employee, were injured and subsequently died.

The United Nations stated that the incident would be subject to a detailed review by the Department for Safety and Security on the safety surrounding it. The WFP said that the route was previously designated for travel without security escorts.

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US Security Officials Blame Intelligence for Failure to Prepare for Capitol Assault

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US security officials told a Senate panel on Tuesday that an assault on the Capitol caught them off guard as there was no intelligence to predict it and all preparations were made for a different scenario.

Active and retired officials claimed in their testimonies that they expected the January 6 protests to be similar to two previous MAGA rallies that brought to Washington, DC, "tens thousands" of President Donald Trump's supporters and resulted in sporadic altercations with their ideological opponents, but not attacks on government institutions or police.

"We properly planned for a mass demonstration with possible violence. What we got was a military-style coordinated assault on my officers and a violent takeover of the Capitol building," former US Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund said.

The hearing were held by two Senate committees - on Homeland Security, as well as on Rules and Administration.

"The assessment indicated that members of the Proud Boys, white supremacist groups, Antifa and other extremist groups were expected to participate on January 6 and that they may be inclined to become violent," Sund admitted.

Paul Irving, who after the riots resigned from his position as House Sergeant at Arms, testified that every Capitol police intelligence report between January 4 and January 6 "forecast the chance for civil disobedience or arrest during the protests as 'remote to improbable.'"

"Based on the intelligence we all believed that the plan met the threat and that we were prepared. We now know that we had a wrong plan," Irving said.

Their plan had "every available sworn Capitol police employee with police powers" mobilized for January 6 protests as well as the full force of the Metropolitan Police Department with 125 unarmed National Guard soldiers deployed in the city.

"These resources were barely enough," the acting MPD Chief Robert Contee admitted. Officials downplayed a memo from the FBI field office in the state of Virginia that warned reportedly of a possibility of "war" on the Capitol.

"I just became aware that the Department was aware of that 24 hours ago. So on the 6th or the 5th, or the 4th I was not aware that this memo existed," Sund said.

Contee said the memo was received as an email late in the evening of January 5, though, according to him, it would warrant at least a phone call.

"I think that the intelligence didn't make it where it needed to be. We received it in a form of an email that came as an alert only at 7:00 p.m. [EST] the day before," he said.

Contee also recalled in his testimony Sund "literally pleading" for the National Guard deployment. MPD Chief said he was stunned by a tepid response from the military.

"There was not an immediate 'yes'," he added.

National Guardsmen, who were available in Washington, DC, at the time, were all unarmed, unequipped with riot gear, had no military vehicles or helicopters and were originally deployed either to direct traffic or assist coronavirus relief efforts.

The officials agreed that the attack was planned and coordinated, involved white supremacist groups and could have more devastating consequences but for officers' courage.

On January 6, thousands of Trump's supporters attacked the Capitol and breached the building in an attempt to prevent the congressional certification of the incumbent's electoral defeat to Joe Biden. Trump was impeached on incitement to insurrection charges at the House of Representatives, but subsequently acquitted at the Senate. Five people died during the assault with two more police officers committing suicide in the immediate aftermath.

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Canada's Aircraft Manufacturer Bombardier Suffers Limited Cybersecurity Breach - Statement

TORONTO, February 23 (Sputnik) - Canada's aircraft manufacturer Bombardier said in a statement on Tuesday that it has experienced a limited cybersecurity breach.

"Bombardier announced today that it recently suffered a limited cybersecurity breach," the company said.

An initial investigation revealed that an unauthorized party accessed and extracted data by exploiting a vulnerability affecting a third-party file-transfer application, which was running on purpose-built servers isolated from the main Bombardier IT network, the statement explained.

"As part of its investigation, Bombardier sought the services of cybersecurity and forensic professionals who provided external confirmation that the company's security controls were effective in limiting the scope and extent of the incident," the statement said.

Forensic analysis revealed that personal and other confidential information relating to employees, customers and suppliers was compromised and approximately 130 employees located in Costa Rica were impacted, the statement added.

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Canadian, Australian Leaders Agree to Ensure Web Giants, Local Creators Revenue Sharing
TORONTO, February 23 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Australian counterpart Scott Morrison agreed on the need to ensure more equal sharing of revenues generated by web giants with local creators and media, Trudeau's office said on Tuesday. "The prime ministers noted the growing cooperation between Canada and Australia on the regulation of online platforms. They agreed to continue coordinating efforts to address online harm and ensure the revenues of web giants are shared more fairly with creators and media," the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement.

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UN Official Says More People in Iran Must Be Held Accountable for Ukraine Airlines Crash

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions Agnes Callamard said on Tuesday that more individuals in Iran should be held accountable for the shooting down of Ukraine International Airline flight over Tehran last year.

Earlier in the day, Callamard said in a letter to the Iranian authorities that most likely only three individuals who were in the mobile missile unit nearby Tehran's civilian airport "are or were" in custody.

"I think the list of individuals is very large, indeed," Callamard said. "It cannot just be the three members of the crew on the ground that should be held accountable for what happened. Those were the least responsible, coming at the end of multiplication of failures."

Callamard pointed out that the first line of accountability lies with those who decided not to close the airspace given the heightened tensions between Iran and the United States at the time of the strike.

On January 3, 2020, the United States killed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) top commander Qasem Soleimani via a drone strike near Baghdad. The assassination was followed by Iran's retaliatory missile strikes on January 8 on two US bases in Iraq.

Callamard said that anticipating a US response, Iran's military moved anti-aircraft missile units around a sensitive military installation near Tehran's civilian airport. Iran also established a communication system between civilian air traffic services and the military.

According to Callamard, the second line of accountability resides in those who set up what should have been a "bulletproof system" of communication. The system turned out to be either

not put in place or inadequate to allow to determine that the targeted object was a civilian aircraft rather than a US missile.

Callamard further criticized Iran's decision not to disclose for three days the information that the Ukrainian Airlines flight had been shot down, calling it a "grave violation" to the right to life. Additionally, Callamard said the "inappropriate" conduct of the investigation at the site of the crash, which was bulldozed and looted, violated basic standards and also requires the search for individual responsibilities.

The Ukraine International Airlines' Kiev-bound flight crashed after being shot down having taken off from Tehran on January 8, 2020. All 176 people aboard were killed, including nationals of Ukraine, Iran, Afghanistan, Canada, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

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Blinken in Call With Polish Counterpart Emphasizes Security Cooperation - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a call with Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau stressed the importance of bilateral security cooperation, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"Secretary Blinken emphasized the importance of Polish-American security cooperation to NATO and the Transatlantic Community and thanked the Foreign Minister for Poland's steadfast partnership," Price said in a readout.

Blinken also said he looks forward to working with Poland on a wide range of global and regional challenges.

On February 11, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Poland's Minister of National Defense Mariusz Blaszczak discussed the bilateral strategic partnership between the two nations in another telephone conversation.

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Blinken, Cabo Verdean Minister Plan to Boost Commercial, Security Ties - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed boosting security and commercial bilateral relations with the foreign minister and defense minister of the small Atlantic Ocean archipelago nation of Cabo Verde, Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Tuesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with the Cabo Verdean Minister of Foreign Affairs and Defense Rui Figueiredo today," Price said. "Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Figueiredo discussed our planned bilateral dialogue to advance shared priorities, expand commercial relations, and strengthen our security partnership."

Blinken pointed out that the United States was proud to be a friend to Cabo Verde and praised it as a model of democratic governance and human rights in Africa, Price said.

The Secretary of State expressed interest in working with the Cabo Verdean government to bring investment opportunities to the attention of US firms, Price said.

Blinken also congratulated Cabo Verde for its selection for the US National Guard's State Partnership Program, Price added.

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Twitter Permanently Suspends Hundreds of Accounts Linked to Iran, Russia, Armenia

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Twitter permanently suspended hundreds of additional accounts linked to Iran, Russia and Armenia, the social media company announced in a statement on Tuesday.

"The networks we are disclosing relate to independent, state-affiliated information operations that we have attributed to Armenia, Russia and a previously disclosed network from Iran. Once our investigations were complete, the 373 associated accounts across the four networks were permanently suspended from Twitter for violations of our platform manipulation policies," the statement posted by Twitter Safety said.

Only 243 of the accounts are new, however, as 130 of the ones linked to Iran Twitter announced in October as the company noted in today's release.

The social media giant said, to date, a total of 238 accounts removed were tied to Iran, 100 to Russia and 35 to Armenia.

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UN Urges for Calm, Dialogue in Georgia Amid Protests - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United Nations calls calm and dialogue in Georgia amid protests in the capital Tbilisi after the arrest of the country's main opposition leader, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, police stormed the opposition United National Movement (UNM) party office in Tbilisi and detained its leader, Nika Melia, and more than a dozen other activists. Georgia's opposition parties and their supporters have taken to the streets to protest the detention.

"We are following with concern the developments that we are seeing in Tbilisi. It's very important that there'd be calm, that the outstanding political issues be addressed through dialogue, that there'd be respect for the rule of law, and of course the democratic process," Dujarric said.

Prior to this detention, Melia was briefly arrested for leading riots and anti-Russian protests back in June 2019 and was on a \$9,063 bail. Melia was forced to wear a monitoring bracelet but

removed it publicly during another wave of opposition protests, which erupted in November 2020 in non-recognition of the general election results. The move prompted a court to revise the conditions of Melia's release and impose a new bail, which he has refused to pay.

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White House Defends Reopening of Texas Care Facility for Migrant Children

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki on Tuesday defended the Biden administration's decision to reopen a Texas care facility to house up to 700 migrant children.

"This is not kids being kept in cages, this is a facility that was opened that's going to follow the same standard as other HHS [Department of Health and Human Services] facilities. That is never our intention of replicating the immigration policies of the past administration, but we are in a circumstance where we are not going to expel unaccompanied minors at the border, that would be inhumane," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki also said the Biden administration intends to close the facility when it is no longer needed, however, coronavirus mitigation efforts in federal facilities for migrant children has currently limited available space.

The Biden administration will not have migrant children in facilities that are not COVID-19 safe, she added.

On Monday, HHS said it has reopened the temporary Influx Care Facility in Carrizo Springs, Texas, due to an increasing number of migrant children unaccompanied by a parent who are being apprehended at the US border with Mexico.

The facility had been closed since July 2019, but has now reopened to house up to 700 migrant children ages 13 to 17 years old. As of February 18, there are currently about 6,800 unaccompanied migrant children under the care of the HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement. US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said it has seen a steady increase in border encounters since April 2020, which has caused some facilities to reach maximum safe holding capacity. CBP data shows that more than 70,000 migrants have been apprehended at the US-Mexico border each month from October to January.

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Biden to Visit Winter Storm-Hit Texas on Friday - White House

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The White House said President Joe Biden will visit Texas on Friday, an appearance that comes just as the state is recovering from a severe winter storm that left millions without power and water.

"On Friday, February 26, the President and the First Lady will travel to Houston, Texas," the White House said in a press release Tuesday.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki in later remarks said Biden will meet with local leaders in the city of Houston to discuss the impact of the winter storm, including relief and recovery efforts.

Biden will also visit a health center where the vaccine for the novel coronavirus is being distributed, Psaki added.

Early last week, the winter storm left more than 4 million residents in Texas without power, some for multiple days.

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Blinken Raises Concerns to Egypt Over Potential Purchase of Russian Su-35 Jet - State Dept

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a call with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry expressed his concerns over Cairo's potential purchase of Russia's Su-35 aircraft, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"The Secretary raised concerns over... Egypt's potential procurement of Su-35 fighter aircraft from Russia," Price said in a statement.

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US to Respond to SolarWinds Hack 'Within Weeks' - White House

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will respond to the SolarWinds hacking attack within weeks, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"We have asked the intelligence community to do further work to sharpen the attribution that the previous administration made about precisely how the hack occurred, what the extent of the damages and what the scope and scale of intrusion is, and we are still in the process of working that through now," Psaki said. "But it will be weeks not months before we respond."

The Washington Post reported on Tuesday, citing officials familiar with the matter that the US administration is preparing sanctions against Russia over allegations related to the SolarWinds hack and poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

The US is also developing "defensive measures" to deter Moscow and other players in compromising federal and private networks, the officials said.

Russia has denied all US accusations related to computer hacking and involvement in Navalny's alleged poisoning.

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Senate Confirms Thomas-Greenfield Nomination as US Ambassador to United Nations
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Senate voted on Tuesday in favor of confirming President Joe Biden's nominee Linda Thomas-Greenfield to be the next US Ambassador to the United Nations.

The 100-member Senate confirmed the nomination of Thomas-Greenfield in a 78-20 vote.

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US to Respond to SolarWinds Hack 'Within Weeks' - White House

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IAEA-Iran Deal Creates More Favorable Atmosphere for Diplomacy - Director General

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The recent agreement between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) may facilitate a smooth return to the "previous situation," while also creating a more favorable atmosphere for diplomacy, IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi said in Tuesday.

"Of course, this is far from an ideal situation but we need to recognize that we are confronted with a new reality," Grossi said. "It is our conviction that in doing what we did, we can facilitate a smooth return to the previous situation, if that is possible, after the consultations that are going to take place. And most of all, I think we facilitated an easier atmosphere and time for the indispensable diplomacy that will be deployed in the next few days."

Iran and IAEA agreed over the weekend to prolong inspections of the country's nuclear facilities in a limited capacity. Iran had previously threatened to suspend all inspections by February 23 if the US sanctions against the Islamic Republic were not lifted by Monday.

Iran had earlier set a deadline for the United States to lift the sanctions imposed by the previous Trump administration. Current President Joe Biden had conditioned the lifting of sanctions with Iran halting uranium enrichment. The Biden administration said it was reviewing the positions regarding Iran left by the Trump administration.

In 2015, Iran, China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union signed the nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The JCPOA stipulates the removal of international sanctions on Iran in exchange for Tehran scaling down its nuclear program. In 2018, the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the agreement and re-imposed sanctions on Iran. Tehran responded by gradually abandoning its own commitments under the accord.

In December, Iran passed a law to increase its uranium enrichment and stop IAEA inspections of its nuclear sites in a bid to achieve the removal of the re-imposed sanctions. Iran's atomic energy organization announced in January that the country had succeeded in enriching uranium at 20 percent at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant.

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US Congress Job-Approval Rating at Hits 12-Year High at 35% - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Approval of Congress surged 10 points in the past month, to 35 percent, reflecting enthusiasm among Democrat and independent voters over the election of President Joe Biden, a new Gallup poll revealed on Tuesday.

"Democrats' approval of Congress has surged 31 points in the past month and a total of 50 points since December. Independents' approval has increased by a total of 17 points in the past two months, including an eight-point increase this month," a press release explaining the poll said.

In contrast, Republican voter approval of Congress dipped nine points in the past month to 8 percent, the release said.

Gallup attributed the results in part to COVID-19 relief legislation now working its way through Congress, as well as the impeachment of former President Donald Trump.

However, Gallup noted that the shift in voter approval of Congress "may be more fundamentally related to the change in the Washington power structure," especially with Democrats' gaining control of the Senate.

The previous high of 39 percent approval of Congress occurred in the early days of the Obama administration, when Democrats last controlled the presidency and both chambers of Congress, the release said.

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Biden to Visit Winter Storm-Hit Texas on Friday - White House

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US Preparing Sanctions Against Russia Over SolarWinds, Navalny - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US administration is preparing sanctions against Russia over allegations related to the SolarWinds hack and poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, the Washington Post reported on Tuesday, citing officials familiar with the matter.

The US is also developing "defensive measures" to deter Moscow and other players in compromising federal and private networks, the officials said.

Russia has denied all US accusations related to computer hacking and involvement in Navalny's alleged poisoning.

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Biden Admin. Guantanamo Review Must Ensure Remedies for Torture Victims - UN Experts

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's review of the Guantanamo Bay detention center must ensure that remedies will be provided for detainees that have been tortured there, the United Nations said in a press release on Tuesday.

"UN experts said today the US administration's review of how to close the Guantanamo Bay detention center should also address ongoing violations of human rights being committed against the 40 remaining detainees, including torture and other ill-treatment," the release said. The release, citing UN experts, said it is important that detainees who were denied fundamental rights under international law, including right to a fair trial and torture, must be provided adequate remedy and reparation.

The remaining detainees at the detention center are now elderly individuals affected by the physical and psychological torture, the release noted.

The UN experts said the United States must ensure it never repeats the same practices again and that crimes committed at the detention center do not remain unpunished.

On February 12, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters the Biden administration intends to close the Guantanamo Bay detention center by the end of President Joe Biden's term in office.

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

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Biden Halt to New Oil, Gas Leases Not Permanent - Interior Secretary Nominee

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's ban on new oil and natural gas leases on land owned by the US federal government is a temporary pause to review the federal fossil fuel program and not a permanent prohibition, Interior Secretary nominee Deb Haaland said during her Senate confirmation hearing on Tuesday.

"I don't believe that it is a permanent ban," Haaland told the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. "It's my understanding that President Biden has put just a pause on new leases. He didn't ban new leases; he didn't put a moratorium on new leases. It's a pause to review the fossil [fuel] program."

Haaland's comments came in response to concerns over the potential loss of tens of thousands of jobs, particularly in energy rich Western US states, raised by the Committee's senior Republican Senator John Barrasso.

The nominee faces opposition from lawmakers in energy producing states over previous denunciations of all oil and gas exploration on public land, as well as opposition to fracking, a process used to increase well output that has helped make the United States a net exporter of fossil fuels for the first time in decades.

Haaland sought to address those concerns in her opening statement, in which she pledged to work cooperatively with all stakeholders and both parties in Congress "to strike the right balance going forward."

President Joe Biden has embarked on an aggressive effort to combat climate change by reducing carbon emissions from fossil fuels. His first acts as president included halting construction of a major pipeline construction project and blocked new oil and gas leases on land owned by the federal government.

Despite the lease ban, Haaland noted that thousands of leases and thousands of permits continue to move forward, and that new technology to cut greenhouse gases from fossil fuels is key to the Biden administration's goal of transitioning to an economy with net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

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US Economy Seen Back to Pre-Pandemic Levels By First Half of 2021 - Powell

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US GDP growth is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels by the first half of 2021, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell told the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee on Tuesday.

"By the first half of the year," Powell said in response to a question on when US gross domestic product growth could be expected to show the same levels as in February 2020. However, Powell told the Committee earlier that the outlook for the US economy remained "highly uncertain" and the recovery appears uneven and far from complete despite the achieved progress.

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Biden Admin. Guantanamo Review Must Ensure Remedies for Torture Victims - UN Experts

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US Air Force Does Not Use Pratt & Whitney Engine Involved in Denver Incident- Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force (USAF) is not affected by the engine failure on a Boeing 777 aircraft over Denver on Saturday as none of its own planes use the engine that failed, a spokesperson announced on Tuesday. "At this time, the Pratt & Whitney military engineering team does not believe there to be any impact on the USAF fleet from the recent Boeing 777 engine event," the spokesperson said in a statement.

The Pratt & Whitney PW4000-112 engine that failed on the United Airlines Boeing 777 was not installed on any US Air Force aircraft," the spokesperson noted. "Other engines from the PW4000 family are in the USAF inventory, including PW4000-94 engines on KC-46s [air tankers]."

The explained that the engine designs in question are significantly different, but the US Air Force is nevertheless monitoring the situation.

"We are monitoring the ongoing investigation and will take appropriate actions as information on any USAF-owned engines becomes available," the spokesperson added.

On Saturday, a United Airlines Boeing 777 plane made a rapid return to Denver International Airport after take off because of engine failure. No one was injured in the incident.

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IAEA Chief Says Iran Need to Explain Traces of Nuclear Materials at Undeclared Facilities
(Updates with background in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi said on Tuesday that Iran should clarify the presence of traces of nuclear materials found at undeclared facilities.

"A number of points where Iran needs to reply and to give us answers - on particles of uranium and other materials which have been found on places where they shouldn't be," Grossi said.

"The process is ongoing and it has not yielded positive results for now. So, this is an activity that continues and I will be reporting about that next week when the Board of Governors of the IAEA meets for their spring session."

At the beginning of February, media reported that IAEA inspectors found radioactive traces at two Iranian facilities, sparking concern over possible undeclared nuclear-related activities. The samples were taken during the IAEA inspection carried out in the fall, according to the reports. The IAEA has not reportedly informed the member states about its findings in Iran, and, in line with the existing procedures, the organization is currently asking Iran to provide an explanation. Grossi visited Iran over the weekend to discuss Iran's decision to limit IAEA inspections of its nuclear sites. Iran had threatened to suspend all inspections by February 23 if the US sanctions against the Islamic Republic were not lifted by Monday.

Iran and the IAEA were ultimately able to strike a temporary deal, according to which Tehran will continue to fully implement the Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA past February 23, although in a limited capacity

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. The agreement required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief, including lifting the arms embargo five years after the agreement's adoption. In 2018, the United States withdrew from the JCPOA and re-imposed sanctions against Iran, prompting Tehran to largely abandon its obligations under the accord.

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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EU Urges China to Let Independent Rights Observers Access Xinjiang - Foreign Policy Chief

WASHINGTON, February 22 (Sputnik) - The European Union is calling on China to let independent rights observers into the Xinjiang province to investigate alleged abuses, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said during a UN Security Council meeting on Tuesday.

"I also want to reiterate the European Union's call on China to comply with its obligation on the national and international law to respect and protect human rights including the rights of persons belonging to minorities in Xinjiang, in Tibet and in Inner Mongolia," Borrell said. "Once again, we urge China to allow meaningful access to Xinjiang for independent observers including High Commissioner Bachelet."

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet first asked for access to the Xinjiang region to conduct a fact-finding mission in 2018.

Beijing has said it would welcome the United Nations mission provided it does not interfere in China's internal affairs.

Western nations, organizations and media outlets have long accused China of mistreatment, arbitrary imprisonment and torture of minorities who reside in various provinces in the country.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2018 published a report saying that over a million people were held in re-education camps against their will.

The United States designated China's actions in Xinjiang a genocide during the last weeks of tenure of then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Current Secretary of State Antony Blinken has on separate occasions affirmed his agreement with Pompeo regarding the genocide designation.

China has denied all the charges and maintains the camps are education centers and some of them serve to de-radicalize locals from Islamic extremism, separatism and terrorism.

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Biden Halt to New Oil, Gas Leases Not Permanent - Interior Secretary Nominee

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The ban on new oil and natural gas leases on land owned by the US federal government by the Biden administration is a temporary pause to review the federal fossil fuel program and not a permanent prohibition, Interior Secretary nominee Deb Haaland said during her Senate confirmation hearing on Tuesday.

"I don't believe that it is a permanent ban," Haaland told the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. "It's my understanding that President Biden has put just a pause on new leases. He didn't ban new leases; he didn't put a moratorium on new leases. It's a pause to review the fossil [fuel] program."

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US Supports European Allies' Military Efforts in Africa - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States supports the military efforts of its European allies in Africa and maintains close cooperation with them, US Army Europe and Africa commander Gen. Christopher Cavoli told reporters on Tuesday.

"Our European allies and partners actually already are very active in Africa and we find ourselves in support of their efforts," Cavoli said during a press briefing.

Cavoli explained that the Defense Department is coordinating very closely with its partners in different countries, including in Mali, where the US military provides support to French-led peacekeeping operations.

"The United States is very eager to see our European allies lead in that fashion," he said.

Cavoli also noted that Russia is using all diplomatic, economic and in some cases military opportunities to expand its presence and influence in the region, but expressed confidence the United States will provide more attention to Africa.

"We offer a different model. We offer stability, counter-violent extremist organizations activity and we offer the promise of democracy, human rights and the rule of law," Cavoli said.

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Fed Expects To Keep US Rates Low Till Inflation Exceeds 2% for Some Time: Chair Powell

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve expects to keep US interest rates low until inflation exceeds 2.0 percent over considerable time, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said on Tuesday.

"We expect that it will be appropriate to maintain the current accommodative target range of the federal funds rate until labor market conditions have reached levels consistent with the Committee's assessments of maximum employment and inflation has risen to 2 percent and is on track to moderately exceed 2 percent for some time," Powell said in testimony before the Senate Banking Committee.

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US Economic Outlook 'Highly Uncertain' Despite Vaccinations - Fed Chairman Powell

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US economic outlook remains highly uncertain, with recovery appearing uneven and far from complete, despite progress in vaccinations for the COVID-19, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said on Tuesday.

"In recent weeks, the number of new cases and hospitalizations has been falling, and ongoing vaccinations offer hope for a return to more normal conditions later this year," Powell said in testimony before the Senate Banking Committee. "However, the economic recovery remains uneven and far from complete, and the path ahead is highly uncertain."

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New York Shuts Down, Fines Bitfinex Cryptocurrency Platform - State Attorney General

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - New York State authorities have shut down the digital currency trading platform Bitfinex and fined its operators \$18.5 million for defrauding investors over losses of about \$850 million, state Attorney General Letitia James said on Tuesday.

"This week, we're taking action to end Bitfinex and Tether's illegal activities in New York," James said in a statement, referring to the digital currency trading platform itself and its product Tether stablecoin. "An agreement with iFinex, Tether and their related entities will require them to cease any further trading activity with New Yorkers, as well as force the companies to pay \$18.5 million in penalties, in addition to requiring a number of steps to increase transparency." According to the statement, iFinex - the operator of Bitfinex - and Tether made false statements about the backing of the Tether stablecoin and about the movement of hundreds of millions of dollars between the two companies to cover up the truth about massive losses by Bitfinex, estimated at \$850 million.

Millions of investors around the world use virtual currencies as decentralized digital currencies - unlike regulated government currencies such as the dollar - to buy goods and services, oftentimes anonymously, through secure online transactions.

Stablecoins, specifically, are virtual currencies that are always supposed to have the same real-dollar value. In the case of Tether, the company represented that each of its stablecoins were backed one-to-one by US dollars in reserve.

James said Tether's claims that its virtual currency was fully backed by US dollars at all times was untrue.

"These companies obscured the true risk investors faced and were operated by unlicensed and unregulated individuals and entities dealing in the darkest corners of the financial system," she said.

James also vowed to relentlessly pursue those who tried to trade virtual currencies in New York state by bending its laws, noting that just last week, her office shut down operator Coinseed for its fraudulent conduct.

"These legal actions send a clear message that we will stand up to corporate greed whether it comes out of a traditional bank, a virtual currency trading platform, or any other type of financial institution," James said.

The New York action comes a day after US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen called Bitcoin, the so-called granddaddy of the cryptocurrencies, to be an inefficient payment system that was too volatile for the average user or investor and often misused for illicit finance.

Despite Bitcoin's popularity, objection by many governments against the cryptocurrency, which is banned by India and Nigeria, has also led to huge intraday swings in its price.

Bitcoin's price has hit record highs above \$58,000 during the weekend, skyrocketing from below \$11,000 at the end of September. Market capitalization in the cryptocurrency has exceeded \$1 trillion, matching tech giants like Amazon, Google and Microsoft, as speculators and even endowments of leading universities like Harvard and Yale bought into the 12-year-old digital currency.

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US Honors Ukrainian Ex-Prosecutor General With Anticorruption Champions Award - State Dept

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States honored Ukraine's former Prosecutor General Ruslan Ryaboshapka among a dozen others by granting them awards for combating corruption, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced on Tuesday.

"As President (Joe) Biden has emphasized, our commitment to truth, transparency, and accountability is a mission that we must live at home and exemplify abroad," Blinken said in a statement. "I commend the dedication of these 12 brave individuals to these same ideals."

Along with Ryaboshapka, the honorees include Albania's Chief Justice Ardian Dvorani, Ecuadorean Attorney General Diana Salazar, Micronesia's State Public Auditor Sophia Pretrick and Guatemalan Prosecutor Juan Francisco Sandoval Alfaro and Director General for Electronic Payments at the Central Bank of Iraq Dhuha A. Mohammed.

Also among those honored were activists Ibrahima Kalil Gueye of Guinea and Anjali Bhardwaj of India, investigative journalist Bolot Temirov of the Kyrgyz Republic, Chairman of Libya's National Oil Corporation Mustafa Abdullah Sanalla, Mayor Victor Sotto of The Philippines and Commissioner of Sierra Leone's Anti-Corruption Commission Francis Ben Kaifala, Blinken said. "The Biden Administration recognizes that we will only be successful in combating these issues by working in concert with committed partners, including courageous individuals who champion anticorruption efforts and countries working to fulfill their commitments to international anticorruption standards," he said. "For that reason, I am announcing a new International Anticorruption Champions Award, recognizing individuals who have worked tirelessly, often in

the face of adversity, to defend transparency, combat corruption, and ensure accountability in their own countries.”

Blinken noted that the United States was the first country to criminalize foreign bribery and has worked with partners in other countries worldwide to recover and return more than \$1 billion in stolen public assets in the past two years.

In March, the Ukrainian parliament passed a vote of no-confidence in Prosecutor General Ruslan Ryaboshapka, triggering his resignation.

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EU Urges China to Let Independent Rights Observers Access Xinjiang - Foreign Policy Chief

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The European Union is calling on China to let independent rights observers into the Xinjiang province to probe allege abuses, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said at a UN Security Council meeting on Tuesday.

“I also want to reiterate the European Union’s call on China to comply with its obligation on the national and international law to respect and protect human rights including the rights of persons belonging to minorities in Xinjiang, in Tibet and in Inner Mongolia,” Borrel said. “Once again, we urge China to allow meaningful access to Xinjiang for independent observers including High Commissioner Bachelet.”