

02/24/21 Wednesday

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Video: GOP Leaders Clash Over Whether Trump Should Speak at Conservative Conference by [Mary F.](#)

The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) is an annual conference hosted by the American Conservative Union that is typically attended by conservative activists and elected officials from across the US.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy and Republican Conference Chairwoman Liz Cheney found themselves in disagreement during a press conference on Wednesday when asked whether former President Donald Trump should speak at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) taking place this Sunday.

During the news conference, McCarthy, who was a vocal Trump ally during the former president's administration, told reporters, "Yes, he should," when asked whether Trump should speak at the CPAC. Trump is expected to deliver remarks during the conference that will be held in Orlando, Florida.

However, Cheney, who voted in favor of Trump's impeachment in January over his role in inciting the Capitol riots, noted that while the decision isn't up to her, she doesn't believe Trump should make any remarks.

"That's up to CPAC. I've been clear on my views about President Trump," Cheney said. "I don't believe that he should be playing a role in the future of the party or the country."

After Cheney's comments, McCarthy abruptly concluded the conference by stating: "On that high note, thank you very much."

Cheney was censured by the Wyoming Republican Party following her impeachment vote. Even though she was asked to resign from the state party, she won a vote of confidence to remain chairwoman of the Hosue Republican Conference.

The latest clash between the two Republican leaders comes just a day after Senator Rick Scott wrote a letter, obtained by Fox News, that stated the "Republican civil war is canceled."

"The long-running impeachment show is now over," he wrote. "This political theater should have been held at the other end of Washington in the Kennedy Center instead of the US Capitol. It was an unserious circus. It's over. Now it's time to look ahead."

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Tiger Woods Won't Face Charges After Sheriff Deems Car Crash an Accident by [Mary F.](#)

American professional golfer Tiger Woods was injured in a car accident outside Los Angeles on Tuesday. The athlete is currently recovering from surgery on his right leg at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, after suffering fractures to both the upper and lower portions of his tibia and fibula in his right leg.

In a Wednesday statement, Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva said that investigators won't pursue any reckless driving charges against Woods, because the crash was an accident. "A reckless driving charge has a lot of elements into it, this is purely an accident," Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva told reporters Wednesday, also noting that the most Woods could face is a low-level offense, also known as an infraction, if the investigation determines that Woods was speeding or not paying attention while driving. Villanueva also noted that Woods "was not drunk".

"But that's an infraction and a reckless driving is actually more than an infraction. That's a misdemeanor crime that has a lot of elements attached to it and there's nothing, nothing like that," Villanueva added.

The sheriff also noted that the 2021 Genesis GV80 SUV Woods was driving included an in-vehicle data recorder that might provide clues on the cause of the incident.

"We're hoping obviously there's going to be... this black box and we'll have some information about the speed. It will may be a factor in this accident," Villanueva explained.

Woods, 45, [was driving alone on a windy portion](#) of a two-lane windy road on Tuesday in a Los Angeles suburb when his vehicle crossed on the wrong side of the road before veering into a hillside.

Authorities were notified about the incident after a neighbor called 911. Woods was conscious when authorities arrived at the scene of the crash.

In a Tuesday statement shared on Woods' Twitter account, the champion golfer was revealed to be "awake, responsive and recovering" after [undergoing major leg surgery](#) at a Los Angeles medical center.

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Surveillance Footage of Woods Driving Minutes Before Crash Surfaces
by [Mary F.](#)

Professional golfer Tiger Woods was involved in a single-car severe crash outside Los Angeles on Tuesday and is currently recovering in a local hospital after receiving major surgery on one of his legs.

TMZ Sports has retrieved a [video](#) of Woods driving a Genesis GV80 SUV Tuesday morning on Hawthorne Boulevard in a Los Angeles suburb minutes before the crash.

The surveillance footage shows Woods' SUV trailing behind a minivan just past 7:05 a.m. local time Tuesday, around 5 minutes before authorities said they were notified of the wreck. In the video, Woods does not appear to be driving unusually fast.

TMZ Sports also reported that Woods' longtime girlfriend, Erica Herman, was seen visiting the 15-time champion at the hospital on Wednesday.

In a Wednesday interview with Today, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy Carlos Gonzalez, the first deputy on the scene of Woods' crash, said that the golfer was calm when he arrived and did not seem to be cognizant of how seriously he was injured.

According to Gonzales, he arrived at the crash scene six minutes after deputies received the 911 call and found Woods conscious in his vehicle.

"I don't think he was aware of how gravely he was injured at the time. It could be a mixture of adrenaline, it could've been shock," Gonzalez told the outlet. "Again, it was very quick, the moment that I arrived from the moment that he rolled over, so I don't know if he had time to fully assess his injuries.

The golfer was treated with emergency surgery after suffering "significant orthopedic injuries" to his right leg, Anish Mahajan, the chief medical officer and interim CEO at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, told the outlet.

Although Woods is currently recovering, NBC News medical correspondent Dr. John Torres said on TODAY Wednesday that his injuries may have led to the loss of Woods' leg if first responders and doctors did not respond as quickly as they did.

"The big concern was amputation because if he doesn't get that (relief of the muscle pressure) done quickly — by quickly I mean within an hour or so — he could be looking at an amputation of that leg," Torres explained.

In a Wednesday statement, Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva said that investigators won't pursue any reckless driving charges against Woods, because the crash appears to be an accident that did not involve any suspicious behavior.

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Photo: Mysterious 'Ghost Plane' Spotted at US Base in Somalia Hints at Ongoing Clandestine Ops
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Washington has claimed to have totally withdrawn its military forces from Somalia, but the recent images of the type of heavily-modified private passenger aircraft used by civilian contractors points to ongoing operations of a more secretive nature in the East African nation. Among the photos and footage of the US' [massive withdrawal](#) of roughly 700 military personnel and their equipment from Somalia, which was officially completed on January 17, observers spotted some rare images of a side of warfare not often seen. One image spotted by The Drive's "[The War Zone](#)" features a King Air turboprop aircraft of the type used by contractors, but with a civil registration number that corresponds to no known aircraft - known colloquially as a "ghost plane."

The plane is built by Beechcraft, a Raytheon spinoff that [produces several models](#) of airplane used variously for passenger or combat roles.

The photograph was part of a slew of images of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit pulling out of Baledogle Military Airfield, a former Soviet facility north of Mogadishu used by the US and Somali air forces to coordinate manned and unmanned missions against al-Shabaab and

Daesh. However, after The War Zone ran its story, the image appears to have been removed from the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS), the Pentagon's in-house photojournalism site.

According to the outlet, the aircraft's civil registration number N27557, clearly visible in the image, is not assigned to any aircraft known to the US Federal Aviation Administration. However, a company called Gloome Aviation has apparently paid to reserve the number for a year beginning in June 2020.

The outlet tracked down the company's listed office in South Carolina, but found it to be a facility for paper and pulp company International Paper. However, the War Zone noted that two other registration numbers known to have been reserved by Gloome have been [spotted over Iraq](#) and that call-signs used by those aircraft have also been linked to a CIA-linked group, a company [called Tepper Aviation](#).

As for the plane itself, the War Zone identifies a host of antennae, radomes and likely camera ports signifying the aircraft's use in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions, as well as a possible command and control function for forces on the ground. The Pentagon is known to use civilian registered aircraft for just these sorts of missions in hotspots around the globe, including in its undeclared war in Somalia but also over the seas off China's coast.

Over Somalia, for example, contractors L3Harris Technologies and AEVEX Aerospace have been known to operate ISR-configured De Havilland Canada Dash 8 aircraft and Gulfstream business jets on behalf of US Joint Special Operations Command. The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project ([OCCRP](#)) [revealed](#) last August that these aircraft were being used to spot for drone strikes against al-Shabaab in which L3Harris contractors were part of the "kill chain."

An al-Shabaab attack on the Manda Bay airfield just across the border in Kenya in early January 2020 succeeded in destroying one of their Dash 8s.

The South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a think-tank associated with the University of Peking, also [revealed in November](#) that several civilian reconnaissance aircraft were flying out of the Air Force's Kadena Air Base on Okinawa, Japan, to run ISR missions over the Yellow Sea and both the East and South China Seas. Among the aircraft were two Bombardier Challengers operated by Tenax Aerospace Corporation and a Beechcraft King Air flown by Mater Special Aerospace Corporation, the latter of which is also known to work with US Special Operations Command.

The Trump administration's decision to end its war in Somalia was highly unpopular among Pentagon commanders, especially from US Africa Command, who have been fighting tooth and nail against the Pentagon's long-term plans to shift US troops away from the theater to where they can be used to confront Russia and China. Al-Shabaab is not defeated and a new Daesh franchise has sprung up in Somalia in recent years, and [AFRICOM has argued](#) that a withdrawal will take the lid off of Pandora's box with regards to these terrorist groups.

US operations in Somalia have been justified under US law by the 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists (AUMF), a law underpinning the US War on Terror that the US has used to carry out airstrikes and other operations in several nations [without declaring them](#) formal war zones, including Somalia as well as Pakistan, Yemen, and Libya.

However, US operations haven't truly ended in the East African country, either: US [airstrikes have continued](#) since the withdrawal and the CIA's clandestine mission is likely continuing as well.

In November 2020, CIA agent Michael Goodboe who was in Mogadishu training Somali intelligence cadres was killed in an al-Shabaab attack. The agency has been known to [operate black sites](#) in the country where suspected al-Shabaab militants are interrogated, and a certain number of the drone strikes reported each year that are not claimed by AFRICOM are likely CIA operations, according to [Amnesty International](#).

One way or another, uniformed or disguised aircraft operating on behalf of Washington are likely to continue to be seen over Somalia as long as the US considers fighting terrorist groups to be its job.

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US Air Force Tests Fires Minuteman 3 Ballistic Missile as Biden to Review Nuclear Update Plans
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US has decried Iran's ballistic missiles and its alleged attempts to build a nuclear weapon, although the US maintains thousands of such weapons and is the only country in the world to have ever used them in warfare.

The US carried out its latest test of the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on Tuesday night, launching one of the nuclear-capable rockets from the California coast to a missile range in Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, 4,200 miles away.

"The test demonstrates that the United States' nuclear deterrent is safe, secure, reliable and effective to deter twenty-first century threats and reassure our allies," the Air Force said in [a press release](#). "These test launches verify the accuracy and reliability of the ICBM weapon system, providing valuable data to ensure a continued safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent."

The missiles are typically armed with either a single 450-kiloton W87 nuclear warhead or three 350-kiloton W78 warheads, each of which can strike separate targets. However, missiles are unarmed when test-fired.

Tuesday's test is the first since the Biden administration renewed the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty ([New START](#)) with Russia, which places limits on the size of each nation's nuclear arsenal.

Under the administration of former US President Donald Trump, the Pentagon began or expanded several costly programs for modernizing its nuclear arsenal, including a new ballistic missile submarine, new stealth bomber, new ICBM, new nuclear cruise missile, and new nuclear warheads, as well as overhauls of existing warheads. The Biden administration, which began in late January, is expected to [comprehensively review](#) these programs, and has been encouraged by defense policy thinkers to commission a new nuclear posture review like that issued by Trump in early 2018.

However, the Minuteman IIIs are [more than 50 years](#) old and will require replacement eventually. The Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD), the proposed replacement system, is [expected to cost \\$264 billion](#) over the next decade by itself, not including any new warheads, although some of the W87s are expected to be adapted to the new missile. Last year, the Pentagon gave Northrop Grumman a \$13.3 billion [contract to design](#) the new rocket. The US has about 450 Minuteman IIIs in silos scattered across several "missile farms" in the Great Plains, and about 3,800 [active nuclear warheads](#), with another 2,000 in reserve, as of June 2020.

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Biden Revokes Trump-Era Order Suspending Green Cards for 'Risk' Immigrants
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Amid a purported overhaul of the US' immigration system, US President Joe Biden has been sharply criticized for allowing some of the most hated Trump-era practices to continue, including detaining unaccompanied migrant children in so-called "overflow facilities," which critics note were called "kids in cages" under former US President Donald Trump.

On Wednesday, Biden issued an executive order that revoked another one previously issued by former US President Donald Trump which barred immigrants from getting green cards if they were judged to "present a risk to the US labor market."

The measure, which was an extension of several similar past measures but made in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, "does not advance the interests of the United States," Biden said [in the proclamation](#).

"To the contrary, it harms the United States, including by preventing certain family members of United States citizens and lawful permanent residents from joining their families here. It also harms industries in the United States that utilize talent from around the world. And it harms individuals who were selected to receive the opportunity to apply for, and those who have likewise received, immigrant visas through the Fiscal Year 2020 Diversity Visa Lottery," it adds. The order also directs the secretaries of Homeland Security, Labor and State to review their departments' policies and guidance documents "and, as appropriate, issue revised guidance consistent with the policy set forth in this proclamation."

The [proclamation Biden reversed](#) was an extension of an April 22, 2020, order by Trump that was renewed on December 31 of last year. The justification for the order was protecting American jobs amid rising unemployment due to the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as not overburdening the US healthcare system.

The move is Biden's latest in a slew of executive orders and legislation aiming to reform or remove significant parts of his predecessor's immigration policies. Some of his other changes have included ending the [state of emergency](#) at the US-Mexico border and ending the associated construction of a border wall; significantly raising the cap on refugees accepted per year; ending the ban on immigration from certain Central American and Muslim-majority nations; and shredding a [new citizenship test](#), among other measures.

However, Biden has also been criticized for failing to sufficiently deviate from some of Trump's most hated policies, including [detention of migrant](#) children and [deportation of Haitian](#) immigrants, including young children.

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Biden's Would-be CIA Chief Burns Tells Lawmakers 'Buckle Up for Long Haul' on China, Russia, Iran
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Late in the Trump administration, the US Department of State produced a roadmap for a long-term comprehensive struggle against China that included a "containment" approach similar to that used against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, as well as reforming the US education system to push anti-China views on the US populace.

Burns, who has been nominated to run the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) by US President Joe Biden, told lawmakers at an open session of [his confirmation hearings](#) on Wednesday that Washington requires comprehensive strategies to enforce its will on China, Russia and Iran.

Burns told the Senate Intelligence Committee that China is at the top of his list of concerns because of its "aggressive undisguised ambition and assertiveness" over the last seven years, but he warned that a "declining power" like Russia could still be dangerous, too.

Fighting China's 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy'

"The challenge, therefore, is: how do you build a long-term - and I would emphasize the term 'long term' because we have to buckle up for [the long haul](#) with China. This is not like the competition with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, which was primarily in security and ideological terms. This is an adversary that is extraordinarily ambitious in technology, in capable and economic terms as well, and so it's buckling up for the long term and developing a very clear-eyed bipartisan strategy," Burns told lawmakers, saying China's so-called "[Wolf Warrior diplomacy](#)" was isolating it from regional partners.

Indeed, Burns' approach, and that outlined by the Biden administration thus far, does not significantly deviate from that laid out by his predecessor, Donald Trump. In November 2020, Trump's State Department [published a document](#) advocating an approach to China akin to that pushed by US diplomat George F. Kennan in the late 1940s vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. The document urged that the US adopt a long-term approach to China that focused on isolating China from productive relationships with other nations abroad, and inculcating an anti-China sentiment among academics and civil servants at home as well as in the education system. Sen. Ben Sasse (R-NE) told Burns, a former undersecretary of state under US President Barack Obama, that he expected Chinese President Xi Jinping to "lie" about the country's plans and accomplishments in combating climate change, and asked how he thought that would influence the efforts of climate czar John Kerry to organize international summits on fighting climate change.

“A lot of us are worried about the climate lies that are going to come from China as a way around this,” Sasse said. Burns replied that Chinese climate actions are in the self-interest of China, not a gift to the United States.

Forthcoming Report on ‘Consequences’ for Russia

Kristen Gillibrand (D-NY) also asked Burns about his approach to Russia, which she characterized as a “profound challenge” and cited unproven allegations that Russia influenced the US 2020 election, that the Kremlin was behind the poisoning of opposition politician [Alexei Navalny](#), and that Russia was behind the [Solarwinds hacking attack](#).

“It’s a huge mistake not to underestimate the challenge and the threat that Vladimir Putin’s Russia can pose to the United States,” he said. “There’s no substitute for firmness and consistency in dealing with Putin’s Russia and working as closely as we can with allies and partners who share those same concerns.”

Burns added that the Biden administration would soon issue an “assessment” of those issues that will “not only provide not only the best intelligence that we’re capable of on exactly what happened in those instances, but also a sense of the [consequences for them](#) as well.”

“The reality is that, I think, in terms of American policy of US-Russian relations, that as long as Vladimir Putin is the leader of Russia, we’re going to be operating in a pretty narrow band of possibilities from the very sharply competitive to the very nastily adversarial,” he told Gillibrand.

‘Strategy that Pushes Back’ on Iran

Gillibrand also asked Burns about his and the Biden administration’s approach to Iran. Burns said that the key is a comprehensive “strategy that pushes back against threatening Iranian actions,” including its nuclear program, but also its ballistic missile program, as well as allegedly “subverting other governments” in the region or committing human rights abuses.

“I think in all those areas, we have to be mindful of the fact that even if Iran [returns to full compliance](#) with the comprehensive nuclear agreement and the United States does as well - as President Biden says he is prepared to do - that then needs to be a platform - Secretary Blinken has emphasized this - a platform for building [longer and stronger](#) nuclear constraints and also for dealing with those other areas of threatening Iranian actions that I mentioned before,” Burns said.

Trump pulled the US out of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, claiming without proof that Iran was violating the deal and reimposing sanctions against its economy. In turn, Iran began reducing its commitments to the deal, which includes strict limits on its quality and quantity of refined uranium. Iran has [indicated its willingness](#) to immediately return to the confines of the deal if Washington does, but the US and allies such as France have pushed for [renegotiating and expanding](#) the JCPOA, two things Tehran has rejected out of hand.

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Over 500 Migrant Kids Yet to Be Reunited With Parents After Separation at US-Mexico Border by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Hundreds of kids have remained in US custody as a result of the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy that saw minors separated from their parents at the US-Mexico border by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. A January update by US lawyers indicated the parents of 611 kids had not yet been reached.

A total of 506 children who were separated from their parent or guardian at the US-Mexico border are still in US custody as lawyers have been unsuccessful in reuniting them with their families, a Wednesday [court filing](#) has revealed.

Marking the first such legal filing under the Biden administration, lawyers noted that they were able to make contact with the parents of approximately 105 children since their previous update. At present, of the 506 children, the parents of 322 children were deported back to their country of origin whereas the parents of another 168 kids are believed to still be within the US. As for the remaining 16 kids, officials have not been able to pinpoint any contact information for their parents, sponsor or a legal representative of the parent.

The latest filing follows an [executive order](#) signed by Biden earlier this month, which established a new task force intended to identify and eventually reunite families that have been separated under the Trump-era policy. The effort is headed by the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security.

The Wednesday court filing touched on the efforts of the newly-launched task force, with lawyers stating that "defendants believe that the work of the task force will resolve many - if not all - outstanding issues in this litigation, and defendants look forward to working with plaintiffs with that goal in mind."

It further noted that ongoing talks between officials will help to "develop more comprehensive plans regarding how it will move forward" in locating the parents of children.

Reports suggest that along with the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, the secretary of state, the US attorney general and first lady Jill Biden will take part in the task force's ongoing efforts.

The Trump-era "zero tolerance" policy was announced in May 2018 by then-US Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who promised to prosecute migrants with illegal entry into the US immediately upon their first arrest, separating them from their children.

"If you're smuggling a child, then we're going to prosecute you, and that child will be separated from you. If you don't want your child separated, then don't bring them across the border illegally," Sessions had said [at the time](#).

However, it was later determined by the [Houston Chronicle](#) that the US Customs and Border Protection had been splitting families months before Sessions' May speech. At its height, thousands of migrant children were kept in detention centers before court orders required officials to end the practice.

Although the "zero tolerance" practice had already ended, the Justice Department opted to officially rescind the Trump administration policy late last month.

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Astronomers Uncover Rocky, Super-Earth Exoplanet Orbiting Distant Star

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The radial velocity method, otherwise known as Doppler spectroscopy, is an indirect method tapped by scientists to pinpoint previously unknown exoplanets within the cosmos. The technique depends on an exoplanets' orbit of its host star, detecting any slight changes in the gravitational tug to its companion.

A team of astronomers have discovered a new super-Earth that is orbiting a distant star located some 36 light-years away in the constellation of Serpens, and is believed to be at least three times more massive than Earth.

Super-Earths by nature are described as a class of planets that are much more massive than Earth, but lighter than ice-giants such as Neptune or Uranus. According to the US' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), such planets [range between](#) "twice the size of Earth and up to 10 times its mass."

Astronomers noted in their [recently published](#) findings that they discovered the mysterious new exoplanet, since dubbed GJ 740 b, through the use of the radial velocity method, which has helped to unearth hundreds of exoplanets. Officials also used data collected over several years by the HARPS-N Red Dwarf Exoplanet Survey program and the CARMENES spectrograph in their search.

An analysis of the collected information ultimately led the team of researchers to determine that the faraway super-Earth has a mass of at least 2.96 Earth masses and orbits its host star - GJ 740 - every 2.377 days while maintaining a distance of 0.03 astronomical units, which places it outside of the system's habitable zone.

Officials estimate the exoplanet's temperature to be at roughly 1,033 degrees Fahrenheit. However, that's not all, folks. Researchers also indicated that their findings pinpoint to signs of a potential second, more massive planet orbiting the host star. The team speculates that this yet-to-be discovered body may be a "Saturn-mass planet of about 100 Earth masses."

The findings are expected to be published in the upcoming edition of the peer-reviewed scientific journal *Astronomy & Astrophysics*.

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'Disgusting': CNN Anchor Blasted for Citing Tiger Woods' Past Use of Painkillers After Severe Crash

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Professional golfer Tiger Woods was involved in a severe single-car accident on Tuesday that saw the athlete lose control of his vehicle, which then rolled over multiple times into a grassy hillside in Los Angeles, California. Woods was conscious at the scene, and is currently recovering at an area hospital after undergoing emergency surgery.

Andy Scholes, a sports reporter and anchor for CNN, came under fire by viewers when the veteran journalist touched on the golfing legend's past use of painkillers moments after news first broke that Woods had been involved in a serious accident.

Scholes first caught the attention of many after he remarked during an on-air Tuesday interview with CNN's Brianna Keilar that he was "stunned, I guess, but not entirely surprised" by reports of the accident. He subsequently followed up his take on the events by bringing up Woods' past use of painkillers.

"You know, Tiger back in 2017 was found by police pulled over to the side of the road, asleep in his car. He had said he had taken a lot of painkillers at that time because we all know Tiger's undergone a lot of surgeries over the years," Scholes told Keilar. "Painkillers have become a part of his life."

And with that, netizens quickly took to their keyboards to blast Scholes for his remarks, condemning the journalist for his "[irresponsible](#)" and "[poor](#)" journalism skills.

As the tweets and comments began to roll in, Scholes eventually acknowledged his misstep and issued [an apology](#), telling a variety of users on Twitter that he "didn't mean for it to come out that way."

Hours after reports surfaced of the accident, local law enforcement officials held a news briefing and confirmed that Woods did not appear to show [any signs](#) of impairment when first responders arrived on the scene.

An ongoing investigation is being conducted by the Lomita station of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. Sheriff Alex Villanueva [told reporters](#) on Wednesday that Woods is not facing any charges of reckless driving, but that he may be issued a low-level offense if investigators determine he was either speeding or not paying attention to traffic.

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Federal Judge Indefinitely Blocks Biden Administration's 100-Day Deportation Freeze
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, the Biden administration directed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to place a halt on all deportations of noncitizens for a 100-day period, as officials reviewed current policies. Although the directive did include exceptions, the call was immediately condemned by Texas officials who argued the order violated immigration law.

A federal judge declared in a late Tuesday ruling that the administration of US President Joe Biden was indefinitely banned from enforcing its 100-day moratorium on most deportations, marking yet another blow to one of the president's campaign promises.

US District Judge Drew Tipton granted a preliminary injunction that prevented the moratorium from standing, arguing in a [105-page ruling](#) that Texas proved the 100-day initiative violated administrative laws and procedures, and would effectively place a financial burden on the Lone Star State.

"[T]he core failure of DHS lies not in the brevity of the January 20 Memorandum or the corresponding administrative record, but instead in its omission of a rational explanation grounded in the facts reviewed and the factors considered," Tipton wrote. "This failure is fatal, as this defect essentially makes DHS's determination to institute a 100-day pause on deportations an arbitrary and capricious choice."

Tipton further noted the “injunction is granted on a nationwide basis and prohibits enforcement and implementation of the policies described in the January 20 Memorandum.”

It will remain in place until the matter concludes in the court system or until there is a new order imposed by a higher court. The ruling, which did not require that deportations resume at their previous pace, came down as a temporary restraining order previously issued by Tipton was [set to expire](#) on Tuesday.

However, not all was lost for the Biden administration, as Tipton did not block the whole of the January memo. In fact, the federal judge stated that the order “does not prohibit the government from carrying out or adhering” to other sections of the memo, which include a call for a review of policies and practices linked to the US’ immigration enforcement tactics.

The standoff between the administration and officials in Texas initially began in January, as Biden signed off on a slew of memos in an effort to do away with policies that were imposed under the Trump administration.

At the time, Biden had been warned by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton that he would take legal measures, with the Texas officials ultimately delivering on his remarks shortly after the memo was signed on Inauguration Day. In a [complaint and motion](#) filed by the official, he noted the halt would force the state to “provide costly educational, social, welfare, healthcare, and other services to illegal aliens who remain in Texas because defendants have ceased removing them.”

Additionally, Paxton highlighted the deportation halt was in violation of a Trump-era agreement between the state and DHS that any changes to immigration policy require a 180-day written notice to proposed changes, with a failure to comply prompting parties to file an injunction. Biden’s 100-day order, however, does include exceptions to the rule, specifically regarding individuals who pose a danger to national security or who were not physically present in the country before November 2020. It also exempts persons who have voluntarily agreed to leave the US.

It’s unclear if the Biden administration intends to immediately file an appeal to Tipton’s latest ruling.

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Australia Passes Law Requiring Google, Facebook Pay For News
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Google Australia Managing Director Melanie Silva told Aussie senators last month that the news media bill, as it stood at the time, would result in a revocation of the country’s access to Google Search. In recent weeks, Facebook also responded to the legislation by blocking the sharing of news on Facebook and Instagram in Australia.

After much controversy, the parliament of Australia moved Thursday to pass the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code: a landmark news media law that will force tech giants Facebook, which owns Instagram, and Google to pay Australian publishers for content that makes its way to the free-to-use platforms.

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg declared in a [Thursday statement](#) that the new legislation will ensure "news media businesses are fairly remunerated for the content they generate."

"The code is a significant microeconomic reform, one that has drawn the eyes of the world on the Australian parliament," he said, as reported by Bloomberg.

Per the new law, companies like Google and Facebook will now be required to draw up licensing agreements with Aussie publishers.

The passage of Australia's news media law came after prolonged opposition from both Google and [Facebook](#), which even removed the sharing of news from its platform for users in Australia.

"The free service we offer Australian users, and our business model, has been built on the ability to link freely between websites," Google Australia's managing director [expressed](#) during a January Senate hearing.

Nevertheless, the country went on to carry out moves to appease Aussie lawmakers and fulfill the forthcoming law.

[Sputnik reported](#) earlier this month that Google had inked a multi-million deal with Australia's Seven West Media. Chairman Kerry Stokes told The Guardian that the company has agreed to give Google access to its content in exchange for "fair payment."

Seven West Media will be contributing Australia's "leading news brands and entertainment content" to the new Google News Showcase.

"After further discussions with the Australian government, we have come to an agreement that will allow us to support the publishers we choose to, including small and local publishers," said Campbell Brown, head of Facebook's Global News Partnerships division, in a statement obtained by the [CNET](#). "We're restoring news on Facebook in Australia in the coming days."

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Philippines Offering to Deploy Additional Nurses to Britain, Germany in Exchange for COVID Vaccines

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Carlito Galvez, a former general leading the Philippine government's COVID-19 novel coronavirus response, announced in January that the country is seeking to purchase "at least 148 million doses from seven manufacturers," but procurement will be dependent on global supply.

Alice Visperas, director of the International Labor Affairs Bureau, revealed earlier this week that Silvestre Bello III, secretary of the Philippines' Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), requested that the United Kingdom and Germany provide his country with vaccines in exchange for the deployment of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) to their country.

"Secretary Bello's request is for our OFWs, these are the OFWs that were repatriated, who are here in the country including those who will be deployed. It is important, especially those who are set to leave since many countries who are hiring migrant workers want workers that have been vaccinated," Visperas said, [as reported](#) by the Philippine News Agency (PNA).

She noted that Bello especially requested the vaccines so that the traveling Filipino health service workers will be better safeguarded from COVID-19 and its symptoms.

"We are considering the request to lift the deployment cap, subject to agreement," Visperas [told Reuters](#) on Monday, referring to the Philippine government's 5,000-person limit per country for medical professional deployment.

Government data observed by the outlet showed that, as of 2019, some 17,000 Filipino nurses were working overseas.

"There is no specific number yet but our estimate is more than 600,000 OFWs who are in the country and going abroad. I think around that number, what we are going to request," Visperas said, according to the PNA.

However, some professionals, like Jocelyn Andamo, secretary-general of Filipino Nurses United, have spoken out against the deal, claiming the country is dehumanizing health care workers.

"We are disgusted on how nurses and healthcare workers are being treated by the government as commodities or export products," Andamo told Reuters.

The request comes amid the country's attempt to reach its goal of at least 148 million COVID vaccine doses.

Galvez [told reporters](#) last month that while the goal remains, wealthier nations were able to secure 80% of the vaccines offered at the time by manufacturers Novavax, AstraZeneca, Moderna, Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, the Gamaleya and Sinovac Biotech.

The official added that The Philippines was approved for 23 million subsidized doses via global vaccine partnership COVAX. However, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has guaranteed free vaccines for all 108 million residents, Galvez stressed.

The country has yet to initiate its vaccine campaign, which has set a goal of immunizing 70 million adults.

As of this article's publication, The Philippines has logged more than 566,000 positive cases of COVID-19 and at least 12,129 deaths related to the contagious disease, according to the Johns Hopkins University [COVID-19 dashboard](#).

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Nearly 12.5Mln Syrians Lack Regular Access to Food - UN Under-Secretary-General

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - The number of people who are food-insecure in Syria has reached almost 12.5 million over the last year, representing 60 percent of that country's population, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock said on Thursday.

"Around 60 percent of the Syrian population, that's nearly 12.5 million people, do not now have regular access to enough safe and nutritious food. An additional 4.5 million people have fallen into this category over the last year," Lowcock told the UN Security Council.

Lawcock attributed the surge to multiple shocks that Syria's already fragile economy has experienced over the last 18 months. Among them are the depreciation of the Syrian Pound, which has inflated food prices by more than 200 percent, he said.

The increase in the cost of food has substantially dwindled the Syrians' purchasing power by some 20 percent, Lowcock said.

"Millions of Syrians are resorting to desperate measures to survive," he said.

In addition, more than half a million children under the age of five are diagnosed with stunting due to chronic malnutrition, Lowcock added.

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IMF Actively Assessing Risks, Benefits From Digital Currency Developments - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is actively working with other multinational organizations to assess the potential benefits and risks from digital currencies, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"IMF is very engaged on this issue and analysis, surveillance and capacity development, and actively collaborating with other international bodies," Rice said during a virtual press briefing. Rice explained that digital currencies continue to develop and pose risks and benefits for the global economy, which is why the IMF is following the situation very thoroughly, he said.

"Public and private digital currencies can reduce the cost of doing business, improve productivity and market integration. On the other hand, they can undermine funding, data privacy and cybersecurity," Rice said.

Speaking of future measures to contain the risks from digital currencies, Rice emphasized the necessity of forward looking, supervision and regulation.

"The microfinancial implications need to be managed, including to currency substitution, financial stability and capital account restrictions," Rice said.

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Argentine to Continue Talks With IMF on New Loan Package in Mid-March - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Argentine Economy Minister Martin Guzman is set to visit Washington in mid-March to continue talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on a new loan package, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"Minister Guzman and his team have indicated that they would be traveling to Washington in mid-March," Rice said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson pointed out that the IMF discussions with Argentina continue to be very active and constructive as the Argentine authorities work to lay out their economic plan that could be supportive by the IMF program.

Rice also said the IMF and Argentina have not yet established a specific date for the next formal staff mission to Buenos Aires but are expected to do so soon.

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US Q4 GDP up a Notch at 4.1%, 2020 Decline Stays at 3.5% - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US gross domestic product growth for the fourth quarter of 2020 showed a slightly higher reading of 4.1 percent on its second reading, though the economic decline for 2020 itself was unchanged, the Commerce Department said on Thursday.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 4.1 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020, according to the 'second' estimate released by the Bureau of Economic Analysis," the department said in a statement. "The GDP estimate released today is based on more complete source data than were available for the 'advance' estimate issued last month." In the so-called advance, or first, reading of fourth quarter GDP released on January 28, growth was estimated at 4.0 percent.

While the quarterly revision to the GDP was positive, it was still a sliver of the record expansion of 33.1 percent seen in the third quarter. The third quarter growth was extraordinarily large as the economy rebounded from a spate of lockdowns, social restrictions and job losses in the second quarter associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

Notwithstanding the quarterly growth, the GDP estimate for all of 2020 remained at a negative 3.5 percent, versus the 2.2 percent growth registered in 2019.

The annual decline in GDP came after a year of momentous economic disruptions and job losses in the United States. The US economy lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns and social restrictions forced by the COVID-19. At least 10 million of those jobs have not returned, data shows.

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Biden Approves Oklahoma Disaster Declaration - Federal Emergency Management Agency

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has declared a major disaster in the US state of Oklahoma following a wave of winter storms there from February 8 to February 20, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said in a press release on Thursday. "Today, President Joseph Biden declared that a major disaster exists in the State of Oklahoma and ordered federal assistance to supplement state, tribal, and local recovery efforts in the areas affected by severe winter storms from February 8 to February 20, 2021," the release said.

FEMA explained the president's action makes federal funding available to affected individuals in the 16 counties of Canadian, Carter, Cherokee, Comanche, Cotton, Hughes, Jefferson, Le Flore, McIntosh, Oklahoma, Okmulgee, Osage, Pittsburg, Stephens, Tulsa and Wagoner.

"Assistance can include grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses, and other programs to help individuals and business owners recover from the effects of the disaster," the release said.

Federal funding is also available to state and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations on a cost-sharing basis for emergency protective measures and hazard mitigation measures statewide, the release added.

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UN Humanitarian Coordinator Urges Donors to Fund \$1.9Bln for Sudan Operations - OCHA

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - UN Acting Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan Axel Bisschop urged donors to swiftly provide contributions to Sudan's Humanitarian Response Plan to reach \$1.9 billion it is seeking for 2021, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a statement on Thursday.

"The operational plan for West Darfur is part of Sudan's US\$1.9 billion Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) to provide assistance to 8.9 million vulnerable people," the statement said. "The Humanitarian Coordinator urged donors to provide early and flexible disbursement contributions for the 2021 HRP."

OCHA said the humanitarian coordinator visited West Darfur on February 17-18, where he met representatives of 170,000 people displaced by communal conflict in the town of Ag Geneina. Bisschop observed people living in overcrowded public buildings, including schools, which has disrupted learning for 58,000 children, lacking adequate sanitation and basic services.

"Security must be provided, damaged shelter must be repaired, basic services need to be restored and solutions found to enable a return to normality," Bisschop said.

On January 16-18, at least 235 people were killed and more injured in two separate incidents of inter-communal clashes in West and South Darfur. The hostilities erupted three weeks after a joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission pulled out from the region, handing responsibility to the government in Khartoum.

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Coronavirus Pandemic Set to Fuel Islamic State Recruitment Efforts - Jordan King Abdullah

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus pandemic's consequences such as numerous crises and inequalities will lead to a boost in efforts of the Islamic State terror group

(banned in Russia) to recruit fighters, Jordan's King Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein said on Thursday.

"Directing our attention and resources to countering the pandemic has taken away from our focus on fighting terrorism and extremism," he said. "Although the battle may be won, the war is not yet over. Rising inequalities and emerging crises caused by the pandemic will fuel the recruitment efforts of ISIS [Islamic State], Boko Haram, Al Shabab and Al Qaeda."

On Wednesday, Iraqi President Barham Salih said his country is seeing revival of Islamic State activities near Mosul, in Anbar province and sometimes in Kirkuk.

Iraq declared victory over the Islamic State in late 2017, but the army, with the support of the US-led coalition and militia units, still conducts military operations against terrorists and sleeper cells that are active.

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Trump's Tax Records in Hands of Manhattan District Attorney - CNN

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The District Attorney in Manhattan has gained control of former President Donald Trump's tax records following a US Supreme Court decision on Monday rejecting his efforts to keep them private, CNN reported on Thursday, citing an anonymous source.

Prosecutors gained control of the records late on Monday, only hours after the Supreme Court's decision, the report said. The papers contain millions of pages of documents including Trump's tax returns from January 2011 to August 2019, with financial statements, engagement agreements, documents on how the returns were prepared and other materials.

Manhattan prosecutors took the documents from Trump's accounting company Mazars USA, but they will not be released to the public as they are subject to grand jury secrecy rules, the report said.

New York District Attorney Cy Vance, the son of late Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, is investigating whether Trump and the Trump Organization engaged in tax fraud, insurance fraud and other schemes to defraud, the report said.

The Manhattan District Attorney is also investigating whether Trump provided false information to financial institutions or banks about the value of some of his buildings and assets, the report added.

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Yellen Calls on G20 Colleagues to 'Go Big' With Economic Stimulus - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Thursday called on her G20 counterparts to "go big" with the economic stimulus in response to the global economic crisis and step up their support for global coronavirus vaccination programs.

"I urge the G20 countries to continue to take significant fiscal and financial policy actions and avoid withdrawing support too early. If there was ever a time to go big, this is the moment," Yellen wrote in a letter to G20 finance officials during a virtual meeting.

Yellen expressed the United States' support for multilateral vaccine programs such as the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator initiative and its COVAX Facility as well as urged increasing their support for such initiatives.

All countries should take urgent steps to use benefits of international trade and investment in current situation, Yellen said, adding that such cooperative efforts will be greater than the sum of each nation's individual responses.

However, Yellen drove home the message that containing the coronavirus is a priority for a strong economic recovery.

"Containing the pandemic across the globe is paramount to a robust economic recovery," she said.

Yellen also urged the G20 countries to continue with the significant fiscal and financial policy actions and warned against too early withdrawal of such support.

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Americans' Confidence in US Economy Inches Upward But Remains Negative – Poll

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) – Pessimism over US economic conditions eased slightly in February while remaining in negative territory, Gallup's Economic Confidence Index showed on Thursday.

"An eight-point increase to -13 [minus 13] this month puts the index at its best reading since November," Gallup said in a press release.

The current -13 reading is up from -21 in January and is better than the -33 low from the spring of 2020. The lowest point, -72, was during the Great Recession in October 2008, Gallup said.

The index is based on polls asking Americans to rate economic conditions as excellent, good, only fair, poor and also whether the economy is getting better or worse, the release said.

The combined responses are used to compile the index, with a theoretical range of plus 100 if everyone says the economy is excellent or good and getting better, to minus 100 if everyone says the economy is poor and getting worse, according to Gallup.

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US Jobless Claims Down 13% After Week of Snowstorms - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US weekly jobless claims fell 13 percent last week to the lowest in three months, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, as snowstorms in the central and southern United States, particularly Texas, knocked out power and disrupted regular activity.

"In the week ending February 20, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 730,000, a decrease of 111,000 from the previous week's revised level. The previous week's level was revised down by 20,000 from 861,000 to 841,000," the department said in a news release.

The 13 percent drop brought weekly jobless claims to their lowest level since late November. Storms and freezing temperatures in Texas and other states in the lower half of America suffered widespread power outages and disruptions last week. Media reports said officials were also investigating fraud filings in at least one state, Ohio, that could have resulted in adjustments.

Economists surveyed by US media had expected as many as 825,000 filings for last week. Some noted that claims numbers had been volatile the past two weeks, making it harder to get a read of unemployment trends amid the protracted COVID-19 crisis.

"Claims have sort of hit a floor and we're seeing this relatively high figure week in, week out," Justin Low, a commentator at ForexLive, said.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. At least 10 million of those jobs have not returned, data shows.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019. Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell told a Senate banking committee this week that the US economic outlook remained highly uncertain, with recovery appearing uneven and far from complete, despite progress in COVID-19 vaccinations. But Powell also said that notwithstanding the broader outlook, he expected gross domestic product growth to return to pre-pandemic levels by the first half of this year.

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UN Rights Chief Bachelet Calls on Belarus to Release All Peaceful Protesters - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called on Belarus on Thursday to release all peaceful protesters and conduct investigations into all allegations of serious human rights violations in the context of the 2020 presidential election.

"All those who have been detained for peacefully exercising their rights should be released," Bachelet said in a statement. "Thorough, effective, credible and transparent investigations should be conducted into all allegations of serious human rights violations, with perpetrators brought to justice."

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US Designates Former Slovak Prosecutor For Corruption - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US government is designating former prosecutor general Dobroslav Trnka of the Slovak Republic along with his son over their involvement in significant corruption, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"Today, I am announcing the public designation of former Prosecutor General Dobroslav Trnka of the Slovak Republic due to his involvement in significant corruption," Blinken said in a statement. "In his official capacity as the prosecutor general of Slovakia, Trnka was involved in corrupt acts that undermined rule of law and the Slovak public's faith in their government's democratic institutions, officials, and public processes."

The US government is also designating Trnka's son, Jakub Trnka, rendering both of them ineligible for entry into the United States, Blinken said.

"This designation reaffirms US commitment to combating corruption in Slovakia. The United States continues to stand with the people of Slovakia in their fight against corruption. The department will continue to use these authorities to promote accountability for corrupt actors in this region and globally," Blinken said.

The designation does not seek to prejudge or influence ongoing or future Slovak legal proceedings involving Trnka, Blinken added.

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Yellen Calls on G20 Colleagues to 'Go Big' With Economic Stimulus - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) – US Treasury Secretary on Thursday called on her G20 counterparts to “go big” with economic stimulus in response to the global economic crisis and step up their support for global COVID-19 vaccination programs.

"I urge G20 countries to continue to take significant fiscal and financial policy actions and avoid withdrawing support too early. If there was ever a time to go big, this is the moment," Yellen said in a letter to G20 colleagues.

Yellen expressed US support for multilateral vaccine programs such as the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator initiative and its COVAX Facility and urged her colleagues to "increase their support" for such initiatives.

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Blinken to Make 'Virtual Trip' to Mexico, Canada on Friday - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will make his first "virtual" foreign visits to Mexico and Canada on Friday, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will embark tomorrow on his first 'virtual trip,' visiting Mexico and Canada on February 26. Secretary Blinken's virtual travel prioritizes the health and safety of everyone involved, while demonstrating the significance of our partnerships with our neighbors and some of our closest partners," Price said in a statement.

During his Mexico "visit," Blinken will hold separate meetings with Foreign Affairs Secretary Marcelo Ebrad and Economy Secretary Tatiana Clouthier to discuss a range of issues including bilateral trade, shared security challenges, migration and climate change, Price said.

"During a visit to the Paso Del Norte port of entry — which links El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico — Secretary Blinken and Foreign Secretary Ebrard will discuss cooperation

between Mexico and the United States to manage migration flows and travel across the U.S.-Mexico border," he added.

Later in the day, Blinken will travel "virtually" to Canada for follow-up talks on President Joe Biden's first virtual bilateral meeting earlier this week with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Price said.

Blinken's talks with Trudeau, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau and other cabinet members will address topics including the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recovery, as well as "taking bold action on climate change, defending human rights in the Western Hemisphere and around the world, and bolstering our shared defense and security," Price said.

The top US diplomat will also meet with local students in both countries to discuss "opportunities and policy options" for the two countries, Price said.

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RPT - US Federal Reserve Payment System Restored After Disruption - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve payment system has been restored following a temporary disruption to services, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond spokesman Jim Strader told Sputnik.

"Services are restored," Strader said after the Fed's banking system, which allows US financial institutions to send money back and forth electronically, was downed for a few hours on Wednesday.

Strader said a Federal Reserve operational error had caused the disruption of service in several business lines.

All Federal Reserve Financial Services customers have been notified about the status of operations, he added.

On its services website, the Federal Reserve said the Fedwire Funds Service, Fedwire Securities Service and National Settlement Service had resumed normal operations, although there were some "ongoing technical issues."

"Balances in AMI are incomplete. We are working to resolve the issue as quickly as possible," it added.

The Federal Reserve sent an alert to such customers at 12:43 p.m. ET of "a possible issue or disruption to multiple services." In a follow-up alert, it said Fed staff became aware of "a disruption for all services" beginning around 11:15 a.m.

In addition to setting monetary policy, one of the Federal Reserve's lesser-known roles includes acting as a bank for the nation's banks, as well as for the US Treasury Department. It provides services including collecting checks and electronically transferring funds, and by selling and redeeming Treasury bills.

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Blinken, Oman Foreign Minister Discuss Security Cooperation - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has discussed further security cooperation in a telephone conversation with Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid al-Busaidi, Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout.

"Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke today with Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr al-Busaidi," Price said on Wednesday. "They discussed security cooperation."

Blinken and al-Busaidi also reaffirmed the importance of Oman's trade and investment relationship with the United States, Price noted.

The secretary of state expressed his appreciation for Oman's mediating role in advancing regional peace and stability, the readout said.

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Majority of Canadians Back Decriminalization of Illegal Drugs Amid Opioid Crisis - Poll

TORONTO, February 24 (Sputnik) - The majority of Canadians support the decriminalization of illegal drugs amid a growing opioid crisis, a new Angus Reid Institute poll revealed.

"Canadians are least enthusiastic about increasing punitive actions against users... three-in-five (59%) favour the decriminalization of all illegal drugs," the poll said on Wednesday.

Support for decriminalization was higher among those who have personal exposure to opioid dependency - either having dependency issues themselves or knowing someone with a history of opioid abuse - than those who had no personal connection - 64 percent to 57 percent.

Fewer than half - 45 percent - expressed support for further punitive measures to be taken against users by increasing arrests and charges for possession of illicit substances, the poll found.

However, respondents were in overwhelming agreement that the opioid crisis in Canada has worsened during the pandemic, echoing the warnings experts alarmed by skyrocketing fatality rates in the last year.

In the province of British Columbia alone, considered to be the epicenter of Canada's opioid crisis, 1,716 people died of causes related to illegal drugs - a 74-per-cent increase over 2019 - according to the province's Coroners Service.

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UN Chief to Convene 5+1 Meeting on Cyprus in Geneva April 27-29 - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres will convene an informal five-plus-one meeting on the Cyprus issue in Geneva on April 27-29, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

"Following the consultations conducted on behalf of the Secretary-General by a senior UN official, Ms. Jane Holl Lute, over the past several months, the Secretary-General intends to convene an informal five-plus-one meeting on the Cyprus issue in Geneva, Switzerland, from 27 to 29 April 2021," Dujarric said on Wednesday.

The meeting will address whether it is possible for the involved parties to negotiate a lasting solution to the Cyprus problem in the near future.

Cyprus was split between Greek and Turkish communities in 1974 after Turkey invaded the island to protect Turkish Cypriots following an uprising of Greek Cypriots that resulted in a change of government and atrocities. In 1983, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus declared independence, but it has not been recognized by any other country except for Turkey. The United Nations has attempted to broker a reunification dialogue, but the effort has failed and the dialogue stalled since the last round of talks in Switzerland's Crans-Montana in 2017.

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Biden Revokes Trump Order Suspending Some Visas Amid Pandemic

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden revoked former President Donald Trump's order that limited some visas during the coronavirus pandemic.

"The suspension of entry imposed in Proclamation 10014... does not advance the interests of the United States. To the contrary, it harms the United States, including by preventing certain family members of United States citizens and lawful permanent residents from joining their families here," Biden said in the order provided by the White House on Wednesday.

In June 2020, Trump signed a proclamation that suspended certain categories of non-immigrant work visas as part of an effort to revive the US economy amid the novel coronavirus pandemic. The list includes H-1B visas for work in high-tech industries and a range of others for low skill workers, interns, teachers and company transfers.

Biden since taking office has eased many restrictive measures that were part of Trump's zero tolerance immigration policy.

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Biden Trade Chief Nominee Sees China as Both US Rival and Partner - Testimony

*WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US Trade Representative nominee Katherine Tai in congressional testimony said the United States must balance maintaining China's cooperation to address certain global challenges while also holding them accountable for unfair practices. Tai's confirmation hearing before the US Senate Finance Committee is scheduled to begin at 10:00 a.m. EST (1500 GMT) on Thursday.

"China is simultaneously a rival, a trade partner, and an outsized player whose cooperation we'll also need to address certain global challenges. We must remember how to walk, chew gum and play chess at the same time," Tai said in her opening statement to the Senate Finance Committee that was released on Wednesday.

Tai said it is critically important the United States have a strategic plan for holding China accountable on trade issues in addition to effectively competing with Beijing's model of state-directed economics.

The United States must respond to China's economic competitiveness by investing more at home in its own infrastructure and citizens, she said.

Moreover, Tai said if confirmed she would prioritize implementing and enforcing the Trump-era US-Mexico-Canada-Agreement.

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Former Antigua Official Gets 10 Years for \$7Bln Fraud Scheme - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge sentenced a former senior financial official on the Caribbean island of Antigua to a decade in jail for his part in a \$7 billion fraud scheme involving an international bank, the Department of Justice said in a press release.

"The former chief of Antigua's Financial Services Regulatory Commission (FSRC) was sentenced today to 10 years in prison for his role in connection with a \$7 billion Ponzi scheme involving the Stanford International Bank (SIB)," the release said on Wednesday.

Leroy King, 74, of Dickerson Bay, Antigua, pleaded guilty on January 30 to one count of conspiracy to obstruct justice and one count of obstruction of justice for his role in obstructing the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) investigation into the SIB after he was extradited to the United States in November 2019, the Justice Department said.

King "was responsible for Antigua's regulatory oversight of Stanford International Bank Limited's (SIBL) investment portfolio, including the review of SIBL financial reports and responses to

requests by foreign regulators, including the SEC, [Securities and Exchange Commission] for information and documents about SIBL's operations," the release said.

King admitted that Stanford's cash payments to King totaled approximately \$520,963.87 over the course of the conspiracy. Stanford also provided King tickets to both Super Bowl XXXVIII in Houston (2004) and Super Bowl XL in Detroit (2006) and gave him repeated flights on private jets, the release added.

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Toronto Cancels Outdoor Events to July 1 Over Pandemic - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The city of Toronto is extending its cancellation for all outdoor events for more than four months up to the beginning of July because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the municipal government announced in a news release.

"To slow the spread of COVID-19, the City of Toronto is extending the cancellation of in-person City-led and City-permitted major outdoor events to July 1, including Canada Day parades, festivals and fireworks," the release stated on Wednesday.

The announcement also covers festivals and other large, in-person gatherings held at outdoor sites managed by the city government or other public locations, such as roads, parks and civic squares, the release explained.

The decision was made in consultation with Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, the City's Emergency Operations Center, Toronto Police Service and major event organizers, the release added.

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US-Canada to Hold First Dialogue on Climate Change by Beginning of April - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and Canada plan to convene the first ministerial dialogue on climate change agreed to by President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau by the beginning of April, the White House said.

"The initial meeting of the Dialogue will occur between March 15 and April 1," the White House said in a statement on Wednesday evening.

The ministerial group, chaired by Special Presidential Envoy John Kerry and Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change Jonathan Wilkinson, will meet biannually at the chair level with the second meeting set to occur in early September, the statement said.

Lower-level meetings will be conducted as needed throughout the year, the statement added.

The ministerial dialogue will focus on three core issues: meeting and exceeding climate targets in both nations, aligning policy and regulatory requirements and mitigating the expected impacts of climate change.

Despite differences on issues including, Biden's Keystone XL pipeline cancellation and the so-called "Buy America" policy, the two leaders have recognized climate change as an area of potential cooperation in an effort to rebuild bilateral relations following a turbulent four years under the administration of former President Donald Trump.

Biden and Trudeau announced the establishment of the intergovernmental ministerial dialogue following the conclusion of a virtual bilateral meeting on Tuesday.

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Data From Over 1M In Israelis Show Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine 94% Effective - Report

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine demonstrated 94 percent effectiveness in a study involving more than one million Israelis, half receiving the inoculation and the other half remaining unvaccinated, a report in the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) said.

The study paired each of 596,618 vaccine recipients to an unvaccinated control person, the report said on Wednesday.

"We matched vaccine recipients and controls on variables [such as] age, sex, sector (general Jewish, Arab, or ultra-Orthodox Jewish), neighborhood of residence, history of influenza vaccination during the preceding 5 years, pregnancy, and the total number of coexisting conditions," the report said.

Estimates for participants starting seven days after the second dose showed the vaccine 94 percent effective in preventing symptomatic coronavirus infections, the report added.

Data for the trial was provided by Clalit Health Services (CHS), the largest of four integrated health care organizations in Israel, which insures more than half of the nation's population, according to the report.

Results from the Israeli study nearly match the 95 percent effectiveness rate estimated in a phase 3 clinical trial that persuaded the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to grant emergency use authorization for the Pfizer vaccine in December.

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US 'Not Situated to Stop' \$500Bln Per Year Loss of Tech to Enemies - Security Chief

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US government does not yet have the capabilities to stop the massive, continuing loss of advanced technologies worth between \$200 billion to \$500 billion a year to adversary nations, Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA) Director Bill Lietzau said.

"We are not situated to stop the \$200 billion to \$500 billion hemorrhaging of technologies today and we've got to up our game and that's a priority," Lietzau told a podcast hosted by the Intelligence and National Security Alliance on Wednesday.

The US government, Congress and counterintelligence and other law enforcement agencies had all failed to pay sufficient attention in the past to the threat of industrial and technological espionage stealing the country's most advanced technologies and capabilities, Lietzau cautioned.

"We have given a little bit of short shrift to the industrial security aspect: That is the crown jewels where our adversaries are focused," he said.

The DCSA needed to be able to look at the overall threat picture better to be able to focus its efforts on screening people posing potential security problems, Lietzau added.

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US Deploys 780 Service Members to Vaccination Centers in Florida, Pennsylvania
NORTHCOM

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - About 780 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines will join the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) at five community-based coronavirus vaccination centers in the US states of Florida and Pennsylvania, the Northern Command (NORTHCOM) said.

"Four of the six service branches will help our federal and state partners in these new vaccination centers, giving more people access to vaccines," the commander of Army forces in NORTHCOM, Lt. Gen. Laura Richardson said in a press release on Wednesday.

At the request of FEMA, the US military previously deployed medical and support personnel in the states of California, New York, Texas, New Jersey and the US Virgin Islands, NORTHCOM said.

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Biden Revokes Trump Order Suspending Visas for Temporary Foreign Workers in US

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has revoked former President Donald Trump's order that limited the number of new work visas for temporary foreign workers in the United States amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"The suspension of entry imposed in Proclamation 10014... does not advance the interests of the United States. To the contrary, it harms the United States, including by preventing certain family members of United States citizens and lawful permanent residents from joining their families here," Biden said in the order provided by the White House on Wednesday.

In June 2020, Trump signed a proclamation that suspended certain categories of non-immigrant work visas as part of an effort to revive the US economy amid the novel coronavirus pandemic. The list includes H-1B visas for work in high-tech industries and a range of others for low skill workers, interns, teachers and company transfers.

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US Border Patrol Says Large Groups of Illegal Migrants Coming to Southern Border

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said agents operating in region of the Rio Grande Valley Texas, are continuing to see an influx of illegal migrants crossing the US-Mexico border daily, sometimes in groups of one hundred or more. "[On Tuesday] McAllen Border Patrol Station agents working near Mission, Texas, with the assistance of air units from CBP's Air and Marine Operations encountered a group of more than 100 illegal aliens comprised mainly of family units (FMUA) and unaccompanied alien children (UAC)," CBP said in a press release on Wednesday.

CBP said agents also discovered a stash house where human smugglers kept 71 illegal immigrants inside.

Over the weekend, agents in the Rio Grande Valley apprehended 230 illegal migrants that were smuggled into the United States in three tractor trailers.

US Border Patrol Chief of the Rio Grande Valley sector, Brian Hastings, said 200 illegal immigrants were apprehended in the region last week during the deadly winter storm that swept through Texas.

The migrants recently apprehended at the border are from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Cuba, Nicaragua, Brazil and Mexico.

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 Signs Executive Order to Address Essential Materials Shortage

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed an executive order to ensure the availability of essential materials, including semiconductors, that have been in short supply over recent months.

Biden directed a 100-day review of supply chains for four "vital products" and a one-year review of industry bases in six sectors of the US economy.

"The order... does two things. First, it orders a 100-day review of four vital products - semiconductors... key minerals and materials like rare earths, that are used to make everything from harder steel to airplanes... pharmaceuticals and their ingredients... advanced batteries like the one used in electric vehicles," Biden said ahead of the signing.

The review will identify policy recommendations to fortify our supply chains at every step and critically to start implementing those recommendations right away, Biden added.

The president also called for massive investments in research and development - "like we did in the 1960s" - to ensure long-term competitiveness of the US manufacturing base in the decades ahead.

The Executive Order was signed in the wake of a semiconductors shortage that curtailed US auto production.

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Biden Says He Read US Intelligence Report on Khashoggi Murder

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said he has read the US intelligence report on the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey.

"Yes, I have," Biden said on Wednesday when asked if he has read the US intelligence report on Khashoggi's murder.

Biden noted that has not yet talked with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz but will be soon. Earlier in the day, the news website Axios reported that Biden and the Saudi King will talk over the telephone on Wednesday. The report added that the Director of National Intelligence plans to release a declassified report on Khashoggi's murder on Thursday.

In 2019, the US Congress legally obliged the previous Trump administration to release the intelligence findings, but then-President Donald Trump ignored the demand.

Khashoggi, a Saudi-born Washington Post columnist, went missing in 2018 after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The Saudi government initially denied any knowledge of Khashoggi's whereabouts, but eventually admitted that he was killed and dismembered inside the consulate.

The Saudi government sentenced several people over their role in Khashoggi's murder and has repeatedly denied allegations that members of the royal family were involved in the incident.

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New UNFPA Goodwill Envoy Vodianova Plans to Travel to Fight Stigma About Women's Health

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - Russian supermodel Natalia Vodianova, who has been appointed UN Population Fund Goodwill Ambassador, said she aims to travel to countries across the globe to combat the stigma surrounding women's and girls' health and bodies.

"It's such an honor for me to become a goodwill ambassador for UNFPA," Vodianova said in a press conference following her appointment on Wednesday.

"As soon as the [COVID-19 situation permits], I'm hoping to travel and to visit some places and speak to women and girls and explain to them how precious their bodies [are] and in spite of the cultural and religious pressure that they have, it's their right to know better their bodies and to protect themselves," she said.

In her trips, Vodianova said she will be tackling the "myths and taboos" about women's sexual and reproductive health that in some parts of the world exclude them from society.

Inspired by her sister, who was born with cerebral palsy and autism, Vodianova said she will put particular focus on the issue of discrimination against women with disabilities who are often denied access to health services because of both their gender and disability.

"Double discrimination also has a direct effect on health of women with disabilities, and, especially with intellectual disabilities, like my sister, are often denied access to health care services and information," she pointed out.

Vodianova has been collaborating with the UNFPA office in Eastern Europe for three years.

Together with the agency, the supermodel launched an initiative called "Let's Talk," seeking to dismantle taboos about women reproduction and advance their rights.

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Trudeau Says Discussed With Biden Fate of US-Canadian Oil Pipeline Slated for Closure

TORONTO, February 24 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says he discussed the fate of a cross-border oil pipeline between the United States and Canada slated for closure by Michigan with President Joe Biden during Tuesday's virtual summit.

In November, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced that her government is moving forward with a plan to shut down Canadian energy giant Enbridge's Line 5 pipelines through the Straits of Mackinac, citing the threat of oil spills that may devastate the environment and economy.

"Yes, we raised Line 5," Trudeau said during Question Period on Wednesday.

The prime minister did not offer any more details about the conversation. Neither the Prime Minister's Office or the office of Natural Resources Minister Seamus O'Regan immediately responded to Sputnik's request for comment.

The pipeline is a critical part of the Canadian energy industry, as it carries oil from Western Canada to refineries in Ontario and the United States.

The controversy centers around a four-mile stretch of the pipeline through the Straits of Mackinac, which separates the state's lower and upper peninsulas and two of Great Lakes - Michigan and Huron. The Governor's office said that Great Lakes supply drinking water to more than five million Michigan residents and support up to 350,000 jobs in the state, which jeopardized by the aging pipeline.

The notice, should it come into effect, will require Enbridge to cease operations of its Line 5 by May 2021.

Line 5 transports up to 540,000 barrels per day of light crude oil, light synthetic crude, and natural gas liquids, which are refined into propane, according to Enbridge.

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US Emergency Agency Urges Americans to Donate Cash, Blood for Texans Hit by Winter Storms

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is urging Americans to donate cash and blood for victims of the winter storms in the US state of Texas.

"Full recovery takes time and requires support long after the storms have passed. A blood donation or cash contribution will make a difference in someone's life and support those Texans in need," FEMA said in a press release on Thursday.

The release included links to the US Red Cross for potential blood donors as well as a list of charities that specialize in disaster recoveries and can put cash donations and volunteers to work.

At least 26 people died in Texas since a week-long blast of Arctic air earlier this month knocked out power and disrupted water supplies to nearly half the state.

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US Wants to Avoid Using Linking US Citizens Release From Iran to Nuclear Deal- State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to avoid mixing the issue of seeking the release of US citizens held in Iran to the nuclear program issue, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters.

"When it comes to these issues, the nuclear issue and the safe return of the Americans who are wrongfully and unjustly held, we don't want to tie their fates to an issue that is complex and that is challenging," Price said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

Price said the safe return of US citizens detained in Iran is an urgent priority for the Biden administration.

Iran has detained at least five US citizens since September.

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Canada to Look at New Measures to Stop Chinese Forced Labor Imports - Trudeau
TORONTO, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will look to introduce new measures to stop Chinese goods allegedly made by utilizing forced labor in Xinjiang province from entering Canadian and global supply chains in coordination with allies and partners, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.

"We will look to bring in more measures in partnership with the international community because that is how we can have the greatest impact and protect the Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities," Trudeau said during Question Period on Wednesday in response to opposition calls for imposing a ban on imports produced by forced labor in China's Xinjiang province.

Trudeau added that his government has introduced unspecified measures to protect the Canadian market from such goods.

In his question to the Prime Minister, Conservative Party Leader Erin O'Toole pointed out that Australia and the United States have implemented or are in the process of implementing legislation regarding placing restrictions on imports suspected of being produced by alleged human rights victims in Xinjiang.

Beijing has emphasized that China's activities at the heart of Western criticism are part of its counter-radicalization programs conducted in accordance with United Nations norms and standards.

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US Federal Reserve Payment System Restored After Disruption - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve payment system has been restored following a temporary disruption to services, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond spokesman Jim Strader told Sputnik.

"Services are restored," Strader said after the Fed's banking system, which allows US financial institutions to send money back and forth electronically, was downed for a few hours on Wednesday.

Strader said a Federal Reserve operational error had caused the disruption of service in several business lines.

All Federal Reserve Financial Services customers have been notified about the status of operations, he added.

On its services website, the Federal Reserve said the Fedwire Funds Service, Fedwire Securities Service and National Settlement Service had resumed normal operations, although there were some "ongoing technical issues."

"Balances in AMI are incomplete. We are working to resolve the issue as quickly as possible," it added.

The Federal Reserve sent an alert to such customers at 12:43 p.m. ET of "a possible issue or disruption to multiple services." In a follow-up alert, it said Fed staff became aware of "a disruption for all services" beginning around 11:15 a.m.

In addition to setting monetary policy, one of the Federal Reserve's lesser-known roles includes acting as a bank for the nation's banks, as well as for the US Treasury Department. It provides services including collecting checks and electronically transferring funds, and by selling and redeeming Treasury bills.

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US Republican Lawmakers Want New York Governor Cuomo Subpoenaed Over Nursing Home Deaths

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Republicans on the US House Oversight and Reform Committee sought to subpoena New York Governor Andrew Cuomo over his alleged role in thousands of COVID-19 nursing home deaths, in a letter to committee chair Carolyn Maloney. "The Committee on Oversight and Reform must examine the link between New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's March 25, 2020, 'must-admit' order and nursing home fatalities, the extent of his cover-up, and if any crimes were committed in the process. The Committee must hear the truth, under oath, directly from Governor Cuomo," the letter signed by 20 committee Republicans said on Wednesday.

Cuomo's order in late March required nursing homes to admit COVID-19 patients discharged from hospitals, while prohibiting nursing homes from testing patients before entry to determine if they remained contagious.

Last month, a report by the state attorney general put the nursing home COVID-19 death toll at 13,500 deaths, up from the official 8,500 toll. Subsequent media reports now place the actual toll at about 15,000.

The letter recounts an admission by a top Cuomo aide earlier this month that New York State intentionally withheld to true toll, believing the discrepancy could be used by opponents to target the governor's administration.

Subsent media accounts then reported that the US Justice Department had launched an investigation of the scandal.

Cuomo, a Democrat, has continued to reject the allegations, even as members of his own party have called for an investigation.

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Biden Renews National Emergency Declaration for COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis - White House

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has renewed the US Declaration of National Emergency for the COVID-19 pandemic, the White House announced in a press release.

"I have sent to the Federal Register for publication the enclosed notice stating that the national emergency declared in Proclamation 9994 of March 13, 2020, beginning March 1, 2020, concerning the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, is to continue in effect beyond March 1, 2021," Biden said on Wednesday.

Section 202(d) of the National Emergencies Act provides for the automatic termination of a national emergency unless, within 90 days prior to the anniversary date of its declaration, the President publishes in the Federal Register and transmits to the Congress a notice stating that the emergency is to continue in effect, the release noted.

"There remains a need to continue this national emergency ... and it is essential to continue to combat and respond to COVID-19 with the full capacity and capability of the Federal government," Biden said.

The pandemic continues to cause significant risk to the public health and safety of the nation and more than 500,000 people in the United States have already died from it, Biden noted.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) -

IRAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

* The United States believes in a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear problem, but its patience is not unlimited, US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

* Russia believes the situation regarding the Iran nuclear agreement is manageable and the participants need to understand the mechanism of the United States' return to the accord, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

RUSSIA REDUCES DOLLAR, EURO SHARES

The Russian Finance Ministry said it had reduced the shares of the US dollar and the euro in the normative currency structure of the National Wealth Fund (NWF) from 45 percent to 35 percent each, including the Japanese yen with a 5 percent share and the Chinese yuan with a 15 percent share.

NORD STREAM 2

* The German Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday that there are no negotiations at the level of foreign ministries with the United States on Nord Stream 2 yet, but Berlin would like to conduct such consultations.

EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Moscow will find a way to respond to the new sanctions imposed by Brussels, and it is possible that the reaction will be asymmetric, Russia's Permanent Representative to the European Union Vladimir Chizhov said on Wednesday.

UN TANKER REPAIR MISSION NEAR YEMEN

* The United Nations is facing new challenges from the rebel Houthi movement in accessing the abandoned Safer oil tanker off the coast of Yemen that are indefinitely delaying the deployment of a repair mission on the near collapsed ship, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

CIA DIRECTOR NOMINEE TESTIMONY

* William Burns, US President Joe Biden's pick to lead the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), said during his Senate confirmation hearing on Wednesday that China is the United States' biggest geopolitical foe and will be among his top priorities if confirmed.

* Burns told the Senate Intelligence Committee that increasing the number of Mandarin speakers at the agency will be a part of his China priority approach if he is confirmed for the position.

* Burns pointed out that the United States may not be world's lone superpower, but it still enjoys advantages over its international rivals.

* Burns also said during the confirmation hearing that underestimating Russia is always a mistake.

FACEBOOK ENDS NEWS LOCKDOWN IN AUSTRALIA

* Facebook has ended its news lockdown in Australia after resolving its differences with the government and has also promised to invest at least \$1 billion in global press organizations over the next three years, the social media company said in a statement on Wednesday.

ARMENIA DEVELOPMENTS

* Armenian President Armen Sarkissian rejected the amendments to the Judicial Code and the Law on the Academy of Justice, which provoked opposition protests, and appealed to the Constitutional Court to check their compliance with the constitution, the Armenian leader's office said on Wednesday.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

* France will introduce a lockdown over the weekend in the northern coastal city of Dunkerque and the communes of Hauts-de-Flandre to head off a spike in COVID-19 cases, Health Minister Olivier Veran said on Wednesday.

* Honduras has registered Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V under a fast-track procedure, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said.

* The Russian Embassy in Cairo said on Wednesday it expects to see Russia's Sputnik V vaccine manufactured in Egypt after the Arab country approved its use.

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US Federal Reserve Payment System Restored After Disruption - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve payment system has been restored following a temporary disruption to services, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond spokesman Jim Strader told Sputnik.

"Services are restored," Strader said Wednesday afternoon.

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US Senators Push Bill to Fight Chinese Censorship of US Firms

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Proposed new legislation would require President Joe Biden to set up an action group to study the impact of China's censorship policies on US companies and citizens, Senator Marco Rubio said in a press release on Wednesday.

"The Chinese Government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continue to use censorship and intimidation to bully American companies on issues deemed sensitive to the CCP," Rubio said in the release. "[T]his interagency task force will shine a light on the long arm of China's authoritarian reach."

The legislation would require Biden to establish the China Censorship Monitor and Action Group, an interagency task force which would create an annual report, complete congressional briefings, and be chaired by the National Security Council staff and include a vice chair from the National Economic Council staff, the release added.

Democratic Senators Jeff Merkley and Elizabeth Warren and Republican John Cornyn co-sponsored the bipartisan bill to monitor and address the impacts of China's censorship and intimidation strategies, the release said.

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US Patience on Iran Nuclear Activities 'Not Unlimited' - State Department

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States believes in a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear problem but its patience is not unlimited, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

"Our goal in all of this is to ensure we once again have a verifiable and permanent constraints on Iran's nuclear program and to ensure that Iran cannot acquire a nuclear weapon. All that is to say our patience is not unlimited," Price said during a daily briefing.

Price reiterated that President Joe Biden feels that diplomacy is the most effective way to bar Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and that is what the US is engaged in now.

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US Awards \$46Mln for 17 Geothermal Research Projects - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US will fund 17 geothermal research projects with awards totaling \$46 million, the Energy Department said on Wednesday.

"There is enormous untapped potential for enhanced geothermal systems (EGS) to provide clean and reliable electricity to power tens of millions of homes across the country," acting Undersecretary of Energy for Science Kathleen Hogan said in a press release. "These investments in EGS research support President [Joe] Biden's mission to take on the climate crisis by pushing the frontiers of science and engineering."

Enhanced Geothermal Systems (EGS) are different from conventional geothermal resources that occur naturally and are geographically limited due to the need for underground heat and fluids, the release said.

Instead, EGS use man-made geothermal reservoirs and can be engineered in most parts of the country, potentially expanding geothermal energy production and transforming the domestic energy portfolio, the release added.

The research will be conducted at the Energy Department's Frontier Observatory for Research in Geothermal Energy (FORGE) Initiative at the University of Utah, according to the release.

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US Federal Reserve Investigating Disruption to Multiple Services - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve is investigating a disruption to its banking system that allows financial institutions to send money back and forth electronically, CNBC reported on Wednesday.

"The Federal Reserve Bank staff is currently investigating a disruption to multiple services. We will continue to provide updates as soon as they are available," the report said quoting a Fed statement.

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UN Begins Registering 750 Asylum-Seeking Migrants to Enter US via Southern Border

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Refugee Agency said on Wednesday that it has started preparing several hundred asylum-seeking migrants for entry into the United States after they had been forced to wait in the Mexican border town of Matamoros as a result of the Trump-era Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program.

"UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, on Wednesday begins in-person registration of an estimated 750 people who have been living in the informal camp at Matamoros," the UN Refugee Agency said in a press release. "A first group could be permitted to enter the United States later this week, pending authorization from US authorities, who decide who will enter and when."

Last Friday, the United States began processing several dozen asylum-seeking migrants who were subject to the MPP program, a policy implemented by the Trump administration in January 2019 that required migrants to wait in Mexico during their US immigration hearings.

The release said the UN agencies are providing assistance at the request of the US and Mexican governments. The International Organization for Migration is providing migrants with COVID-19 testing and transportation to ports of entry while the UN Children's Fund is ensuring migrants are treated in a humane manner.

The UN agencies are focusing their work in Matamoros, Mexico, due to difficult humanitarian conditions at a makeshift migrant camp there, the release said.

An estimated 25,000 migrants are eligible to gain entry into the United States. The US federal government is currently processing several dozens of migrants daily, but expects to ramp up to several hundred a day in the coming weeks.

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COVID-19 Antibodies Appear to Prevent Reinfection for 'A Few Months' - US Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - People with evidence of prior coronavirus infection appear to be well protected against reinfection at least for a few months, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) said in a report on Wednesday.

"People who have had evidence of a prior infection with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, appear to be well protected against being reinfected with the virus, at least for a few months," a press release explaining the report said.

The finding may explain why reinfection appears to be relatively rare and could have important public health implications including decisions about returning to work and school and prioritizing vaccine distribution, the health agency said.

NCI based the report on data from five commercial labs, electronic medical records and private insurers, including antibody test results from more than 3 million people, NCI said.

When the researchers looked at test results for the virus 90 or more days after the initial antibody test, only about 0.3% of those with positive antibody tests, tested positive for the virus - about one-tenth the rate of those with negative antibody tests.

The report cautioned that scientists still do not know how long protection lasts in a person with antibodies and called for follow up studies to determine if protection wanes over time.

The NCI, part of the National Institutes of Health, normally focuses on cancer, but the organization's expertise in serological sciences prompted Congress to request the research.

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Portugal Nominates Guterres to Run for 2nd Term as UN Secretary-General

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - Portugal has sent a letter to the United Nations officially nominating incumbent Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as a candidate for a second term, Guterres' spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Wednesday.

"The government of Portugal has written to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council officially nominating Antonio Guterres as a candidate for a second term as Secretary-General," Dujarric said.

According to the selection process, a candidate's country of origin must submit a letter of endorsement to participate in the election.

Guterres, who has been serving as the UN chief since January 1, 2017, has one challenger.

Earlier in the month, a UN Development Program employee Arora Akanksha, 34, sent a letter to UN General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir notifying him about her intention to compete for the position Secretary-General.

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IOM Calls on Countries in Region to Urgently Rescue Rohingya Stranded in Andaman Sea

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - The International Organization for Migration (IOM) in a statement on Wednesday called on countries in the region to immediately rescue Rohingya refugees adrift on their boat in the Andaman Sea.

"IOM calls on countries in the region to meet their international obligations and ensure that all on board the vessel are immediately rescued and safely disembarked," the statement said.

The boat has been at sea for over 10 days, with loss of life has already been reported, IOM said. Many of the passengers, the precise number of whom is unknown, are ill, and the vessel has been out of food and water for several days.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, the refugees departed from Cox's Bazar and Teknaf in southern Bangladesh. The vessel has been in distress after its engine broke down more than a week ago.

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US Economic Prospects in 2021 Brighter Than Thought - Federal Reserve Vice Chairman

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US economic prospects for this year look brighter than initially thought, with downside risks to the outlook diminished by recent recovery trends and the promise from coronavirus vaccination programs, Federal Reserve Vice Chairman Richard Clarida said on Wednesday.

"The prospects for the economy in 2021 and beyond have brightened and the downside risk to the outlook has diminished," Clarida said in a live-streamed speech to the US Chamber of Commerce.

While the winter surge in new coronavirus cases and the spread of new variants were a concern to the immediate economic outlook, "several effective vaccines" had mitigated some of the risks, he said.

Clarida's speech comes after Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell told the Senate Banking Committee on Tuesday that the US outlook remained highly uncertain, with recovery appearing uneven and far from complete. However, Powell also said he expected GDP growth to return to pre-pandemic levels by the first half of this year.

Clarida concurred with Powell that "it will take some time for economic activity and employment to return to levels that prevailed at the business cycle peak reached last February."

The Vice Chairman pointed out that a number of macroeconomic data releases in recent months have been weaker than expected while spending on services continued to remain well below pre-pandemic levels, particularly in contact-intensive sectors such as travel, leisure and hospitality.

"Although more than half of the 22 million jobs that were lost last spring have been regained, the unemployment rate remained elevated at 6.3 percent in January, and once one factors in the decline in the labor force since the onset of the pandemic and misclassification, the true unemployment rate is closer to 10 percent," he said.

But some of the positives that followed were just as impressive, Clarida also said, adding that retail sales, for instance, had stepped up considerably in January, retracing declines from late last year.

The housing sector had also more than fully recovered from the downturn, supported in part by low mortgage interest rates, he said.

"And while the economy might not continue to grow at the once-in-a-century 33 percent annualized rate of growth reported in the third quarter of 2020, it is clear that the economy has turned out to be more resilient in adapting to the virus, and more responsive to monetary and fiscal policy support, than many predicted," Clarida added.

The US economy shrank 3.5 percent in 2020 after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.

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Boeing Predicts Over 2,600 Aircraft Sales in Latin America, Caribbean in Next 20 Years

WASHINGTON, January 24 (Sputnik) - Boeing on Wednesday forecasted a brisk rebound in global airline traffic and aircraft sales, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, once the coronavirus pandemic fades.

"Through 2039, passenger traffic across the region is projected to grow 5.1% annually, with airplane fleet expanding 3.5% annually as airlines improve utilization and manage higher load factors," the company said in its 2020 Commercial Market Outlook (CMO).

The report projected that the number of people traveling within South America will overtake the traffic flows between Central and North America.

Globally, Boeing projected the need for 43,110 new commercial airplanes and the demand for aftermarket services of \$9 trillion over the next two decades.

Even the near-term impact of COVID-19 is not entirely negative, given the prospect that the slowdown in passenger traffic will prompt airlines to accelerate plans to replace old aircraft, Boeing said.

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UN Repair Mission to Safer Tanker in Yemen Indefinitely Delayed Due to New Houthi Requests

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is facing new challenges from the rebel Houthi movement in accessing the abandoned Safer oil tanker off the coast of Yemen, indefinitely delaying the deployment of a repair mission in the ship, which is on the brink of collapse, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We, unfortunately, encountered some new delays after recent additional requests from the Houthis... and those additional requests are focused on logistics and security arrangements," Dujarric said. "Because of this, it's now difficult to say exactly when the mission could be deployed given these developments."

Dujarric said the United Nations is currently engaged in negotiations with the Houthis on the outstanding issues and cannot finalize the mission's preparations until those are resolved. The deployment of the technical team in the ship, loaded with 1.1 million barrels of oil, was initially planned for late January or early February. The mission has since been postponed several times because of delays in shipping the needed equipment as well as bureaucratic procedures imposed by the Houthis.

Dujarric said the United Nations is willing to send the team as soon as possible as it will become the first step in averting an environmental and humanitarian disaster in the Red Sea and the port of Al-Hudaydah.

"The mission will give the assessment we need to formulate a permanent solution. It's already two years too late and cannot be stalled any longer," Dujarric said.

Safer has been anchored off Yemen's Red Sea coast since 2015 and in addition to nearing a collapse of its structure, it is also vulnerable to being hit by firearms and exploding.

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US Committed to Releasing DNI Report on Khashoggi Killing Soon - White House

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is committed to releasing the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) report on the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"We remain committed to releasing, through the DNI of course, an unclassified report that we expect to happen soon," Psaki said during a press briefing. "I know there were also reports on a proposed call, we also expect that to happen soon, we're still in the process of scheduling when that will happen."

The call will be between President Joe Biden and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz, Psaki said adding that she expects Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman will not be on the call.

Earlier in the day, Axios, citing a source, reported that Biden and the Saudi King will have a call on Wednesday. The report added that the DNI plans to release a declassified report on Khashoggi's murder on Thursday.

The Washington Post reported last week that the assessment implies that the Saudi Crown Prince was involved in the murder.

In 2019, the US Congress legally obliged the previous administration to release the intelligence findings, but then-President Donald Trump ignored the demand.

Khashoggi, a Saudi-born Washington Post columnist, went missing in 2018 after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Riyadh initially denied any knowledge of Khashoggi's whereabouts, but eventually admitted that he was killed and dismembered inside the consulate. The government sentenced several people over their role in the journalist's murder and has repeatedly denied allegations that members of the royal family were involved in that.

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US Oil Production Estimated to Have Fallen 1.1Mln Bpd After Texas Storms - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - US crude production is estimated to have fallen 1.1 million barrels per day (bpd) after the huge snowstorm in Texas caused shutting down drilling in key oil basins, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed on Wednesday. Crude production was projected at 9.7 million bpd at the end of the week to February 18, versus an estimated 10.8 million bpd during the week to February 11, the EIA's Weekly Petroleum Status Report showed.

US crude production hit record highs of 13.1 million bpd in March 2020, just before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. It has fallen since, stabilizing at between 10.5 million and 11.0 million bpd.

The latest slide of 1.1 million bpd comes after the snowstorms that descended upon the central and eastern United States in recent weeks. However, last week's storm in Texas was so unexpectedly severe that oil and gas could not flow properly in key production basins.

While oil production has resumed in recent days, many Texan refiners are still struggling to get back to optimal levels of output. The weekly EIA data showed the national oil refining rate at just 68.6 percent of capacity on February 18, versus the 83.1 percent level seen on February 11.

The collapse of almost 15 percent in refining appears almost entirely due to the situation in Texas.

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Facebook Ends News Blackout on Australia, Vows to Invest \$1Bln in Media - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Facebook has ended its news lockdown in Australia after resolving its differences with the government and has also promised to invest at least \$1 billion in global press organizations over the next three years, the social media company said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Last week... Facebook announced it was stopping the sharing of news on its service in Australia," Facebook Vice President for Global Affairs Nick Clegg said. "This has now been resolved following discussions with the Australian government - we look forward to agreeing to new deals with publishers and enabling Australians to share news links once again."

Facebook plans to spend at least \$1 billion more over the next three years, Clegg, a former United Kingdom deputy prime minister, said in the statement.

"Last month, Facebook announced deals with The Guardian, Telegraph Media Group, Financial Times, Daily Mail Group, Sky News and many more, including local, regional and lifestyle publishers, to pay for content in its Facebook News product in the UK," he said.

Similar deals have been reached with publishers in the United States and Facebook is in active negotiations with others in Germany and France, Clegg added.

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Biden Nominee for CIA Director Says Underestimating Russia "Always a Mistake"

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's nominee for the position Director of CIA, William Burns, said during his US Senate confirmation hearing on Wednesday that underestimating Russia is always a mistake.

"It's always a mistake to underestimate Putin's Russia. While Russia may be in many ways a declining power, it can be at least as disruptive under Putin's leadership as rising powers like China," Burns told the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Burns pointed out the United States has to be clear-eyed on how threats to the United States may emerge and emphasized that responding to those threats with firmness and consistency is very important.

"There is no substitute for firmness and consistency in dealing with Putin's Russia and working as closely as we can with our allies and partners who share the same concerns," Burns said.

"The reality, I think, in terms of American policy of US-Russian relations, as long as Vladimir Putin is the leader of Russia, we are going to be operating with a pretty narrow bend of possibilities - from the very sharply competitive to the very nastily adversarial."

Burns served as the US Ambassador to Russia from 2005 to 2008. He retired from the US Foreign Service in 2014 after a diplomatic career of 33 years.

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US, Israel Reconvene Strategic Working Group on Iran - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and Israel agreed to reconvene a strategic working group on Iran with the first round of consultations expected in the coming days as the Biden administration moves ahead with its plans to revive the nuclear deal, Axios reported on Wednesday.

According to the website, during the upcoming meeting Israel, the world's staunchest opponent to the deal, will lay out its latest data on Iran's atomic project to establish "a mutual intelligence baseline" before moving on to policy discussions.

The group established in 2009 will now be headed by the US and Israeli national security advisers Jake Sullivan and Meir Ben-Shabbat and include officials from various defense, foreign policy and intelligence agencies. Its first meeting will be held over a secure video conference system, according to the report.

The governments, the report added, appear to be launching a serious dialogue rather than a political fight, which is notable given President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's sharp differences over the Iran nuclear deal.

Biden vows to restore the deal ditched by his predecessor Donald Trump and starts consultations with allies around the world on the way forward. Israel voiced its concerns after the US administration agreed to attend the P5+1 meeting with the Iranian delegation arranged by the European Union.

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Biden Admin. to Deliver 25Mln Masks to Community Health Centers Across US - White House

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will deliver 25 million face masks to communities hard hit by the novel coronavirus across the United States, the White House announced on Wednesday.

"The administration will deliver more than 25 million masks to over 1,300 Community Health Centers across the country," the White House said in a statement.

The White House noted that while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended mask-wearing as a critical step to fighting the coronavirus, "many low-income Americans still lack access to this basic protection."

Two-thirds of the people served by the Community Health Centers live in poverty and 60 with nearly 1.4 million of them being homeless, according to the statement.

The United States remains the country worst hit by the novel coronavirus since its outbreak last year, with more than 28 million cases and over 500,000 virus-related deaths.

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Head of US House Foreign Affairs Committee Calls for Greater Congress Role in Arms Sales

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Gregory Meeks urged on Wednesday the US administration to consult more with Congress about arms exports to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries and said that the White House indicated its intention to do so.

"Come to Congress, let us have a part and do what our jurisdiction demands what we do," Meeks said during a virtual conference at the Brookings Institution.

He described his demand as "one thing that I want them to do and they indicated that they will do it before they go selling some of the aggressive weapons" to American allies in the Middle East.

Meeks voiced displeasure over the lack of communications with the previous administration regarding multimillion weapon sales to the region including "certain other Gulf countries... to get them to do the Abraham accords".

Former President Donald Trump agreed to sell top-notch F-35 jet fighters and MQ-9 drones to the United Arab Emirates after the kingdom agreed to normalize relations with Israel.

The deal was put on hold for review after Joe Biden took office. The new US President also retracted support for offensive operations in Yemen in a move that may impede some offensive weaponry supplies to Saudi Arabia.

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US May No Longer Be 'Singular Dominant Player,' Still Has Advantages - CIA Chief Nominee

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United States may not be world's lone superpower but it still enjoys advantages over international rivals, President Joe Biden's nominee for Director of CIA, William Burns, said in his US Senate confirmation heading on Wednesday.

"While I recognize the international landscape is changing fast - we're in a period of profound transformation. The United States may no longer be the singular dominant player... but I would argue we still have a better hand to play than any of our major rivals," Burns told the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Burns explained that the United States has the capacity for "domestic renewal" and the option of working with allies and partners, unlike "authoritarian regimes" as well as "lonelier powers," such as Russia and China.

However, Burns stressed that it is critical for CIA and the United States to focus on emerging areas of interest, such as space - a domain which US rivals are increasingly targeting in an effort to establish dominance in key future theaters.