

02/26/21 Friday

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US Expert Panel Recommends Authorization of J&J COVID-19 Vaccine
by [Mary F.](#)

The US Food and Drug Administration has already authorized the emergency use of two COVID-19 vaccines developed by Moderna and Pfizer. Both vaccines use mRNA technology, a relatively new type of treatment that works by providing instructions to healthy cells to generate antibodies for a certain virus or bacterium.

A US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory panel on Friday voted to endorse a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Johnson & Johnson, paving the way for the vaccine to be granted emergency use authorization in the US. All 22 committee members voted in favor of approving the vaccine.

If the FDA acts on the panel's recommendation, the vaccine will become the third authorized one in the US and the first one-shot vaccine that can be stored in regular refrigerators instead of sub-zero temperatures, like Pfizer's and Moderna's vaccines.

The vaccine has undergone clinical testing on more than 44,000 people in the US, South Africa and Latin America and has an overall efficacy of 66% in preventing moderate-to-severe COVID-19 vaccine.

Johnson & Johnson's vaccine works differently than the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine and uses a common cold virus called adenovirus 26 to deliver the genetic code for a part of COVID-19 into the body. The adenovirus has been genetically engineered in such a way so that it cannot replicate in the body. By carrying a small part of the COVID-19 genetic code, the adenovirus, once injected, can instigate an immune response against COVID-19.

The FDA has not identified specific safety concerns associated with Johnson & Johnson's vaccine. Common side effects among people who received the vaccine include headaches, fatigue and muscle pain. Nausea, fever and pain at the injection site were also reported.

J&J's one-dose vaccine "makes it operationally easier in lots of contexts," Dr. Nancy Messonnier, director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC's) National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, said during a Friday event.

"I expect lots of considerations state health departments are having around these vaccines is more about the ease of use of the J&J [Johnson & Johnson] vaccine and how it might be better suited for some populations," she added, [CNBC reported.](#)

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Biden to Provide Congress Classified Briefing on Syria Strikes Early Next Week, Reports Suggest

by [Mary F.](#)

The US carried out an airstrike against Iran-backed militias in Syria on Thursday, marking the first military action taken by the US President Joe Biden's administration thus far. According to the Pentagon, the strike destroyed "multiple facilities."

The White House on Friday revealed that the Biden administration briefed congressional leadership before ordering strikes one day prior on Iranian-backed militia groups in Syria. Biden also plans to give lawmakers a full classified briefing early next week, [The Hill reported](#). "The Department of Defense briefed Congressional leadership before the action last night. The Administration has been briefing [Capitol] Hill at the Member- and staff-level today. There will be a full classified briefing early next week at the latest," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said in a statement obtained by The Hill.

While aboard Air Force One, Psaki also told reporters that Biden ordered strikes to send an "unambiguous message" to Iran that "he's going to act to protect Americans."

"The president is sending an unambiguous message that he's going to act to protect Americans, and when threats are posed, he has the right to take an action at the time, and in the manner of his choosing," Psaki explained. "He also is going to take those actions in a manner that's deliberative, and that has the objective of de-escalating activity in both Syria and Iraq," she said.

The strikes were conducted by two F-15 Strike Eagles that dropped seven precision guided munitions, "totally destroying nine facilities and partially destroying two facilities, making them functionally destroyed," Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby revealed on Friday.

He also confirmed that administration officials plan to hold a classified briefing next week. Kirby also noted that the Pentagon discussed the strikes with coalition partners, and also notified the Russian government of the strikes before they took place.

During a Friday press conference, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Russia was given an approximately four to five-minute warning before US forces struck Iranian-backed militias.

"Our [Russian] military was warned four or five minutes in advance. Of course, even if we talk about deconflicting, as it is customary in relations between Russian and American military personnel, nothing [no one] gives this kind of notification when a strike is already being delivered," Lavrov said during a briefing.

France also clarified its position on the strikes, stating that it stands by the US.

"In light of these unacceptable attacks, which we have firmly condemned, we stand with our American allies," read the statement, obtained by [Reuters](#).

Some Democrats in Congress have censured the strikes and have requested immediate briefings.

"The American people deserve to hear the Administration's rationale for these strikes and its legal justification for acting without coming to Congress," Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) said in a statement, The Hill reported. "Offensive military action without congressional approval is not constitutional absent extraordinary circumstances. Congress must be fully briefed on this matter expeditiously."

The US launched airstrikes on facilities utilized by alleged Iran-backed militias in Syria on Thursday in response to rocket attacks launched against US personnel in Iraq earlier this

month. On Friday, an Iraqi militia official confirmed that the US airstrike in Syria killed one fighter and injured several others, [the Associated Press reported](#).

Iran is a strategic ally of Syria, providing the country support in the Syrian Civil War as Iran sees the Syrian government vital to its regional interests. The US has supported Syrian rebels and the Syrian Democratic Forces during the Syrian civil war. The US has been accused of leading the intervention in Syria to retrieve large oil deposits in the country.

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Border Patrol Deploying Hundreds of Agents to Southern Border to Deal With 'Migrant Crisis' - Report
by [Mary F.](#)

The US President Joe Biden administration received criticism from activists and Democratic members of Congress for reopening a migrant child facility in Carrizo Springs, Texas on Monday in order to house 700 minors.

In an [exclusive report](#), Fox News said Friday that the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is deploying hundreds of Border Patrol agents to the southern border to deal with an influx of Latin American immigrants.

Around 250 agents will deploy to McAllen, Texas in the Rio Grande Valley Sector on March 1, several Department of Homeland Security (DHS) sources confirmed to Fox News. The agents have been asked to remain at the southern border until March 31. Many of the minors arriving at the border are not accompanied by any adults.

"It's definitely a migrant crisis," one DHS source told the outlet. "If you put everything together, with the number of children that we have, COVID-19 and the lack of proper facilities for this type of special population, it's definitely a migrant crisis.

In a statement to Fox News, former border official Mark Morgan revealed that apprehensions at the southwest border have increased over the last few weeks from between 3,200 and 3,500 to over 4,000 a day. On some days, there are some 1,000 "got-aways," people who are seen by agents but escape detention.

"It's a full-blown crisis," he told Fox News. "Then-Secretary [of DHS] Jeh Johnson under President Obama and Vice President Biden said 1,000 a day was a bad day".

While the US made 78,000 border arrests and detentions last month, the country could see 100,000 southern border apprehensions by the end of April, Morgan noted. Under former-US President Donald Trump's administration, there were around 100,000 southern border apprehensions in March and April 2019.

According to [The Washington Post](#), apprehensions at the border rose 6% between December and January, and may be triggered by economic hardships in Central America being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since taking office, Biden has removed the [Migrant Protection Protocol \(MPP\)](#), a US government action "whereby certain foreign individuals entering or seeking admission to the US from Mexico – illegally or without proper documentation – may be returned to Mexico and wait

outside of the US for the duration of their immigration proceeding." Biden has also paused the construction of the southern border wall.

Despite these actions, the Biden administration has been criticized by opening a Trump-era child migrant detention facility in Texas this week.

"We have a number of unaccompanied minors coming into the country without their families," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters this week. "What we are not doing is what the last administration did, which was separate those kids, rip them from the arms of their parents at the border." "I don't think I'm going to put new labels on it from here or from the podium, but it is a priority of the administration. It's a priority of our secretary of Homeland Security and certainly of the president who's kept abreast of the developments".

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US Presidential Candidate Spongebob Squarepants Faces 5 Years in Jail if FEC Finds Name is Fake
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After a slew of fake and satirical candidates appeared in the 2016 US elections, including candidates named Deez Nuts, Harambe, and Queen Elsa Ice, the Federal Election Commission regulatory agency clamped down, removing unverified names from its listing and threatening legal action.

Who lives in a pineapple and is about to be sued by the FEC? Mr. Spongebob Edward Squarepants of Burbank, California, is who. Filings with the US Federal Election Commission indicate that the would-be presidential candidate could soon face a lawsuit if their name is found to be fake.

[FEC records indicate](#) that on February 21, someone under the name of Nickelodeon's fictitious cartoon sponge filed paperwork to run for President of the United States on the Republican Party ticket.

In itself, a television or film star running for political office in California is hardly newsworthy.

After all, action film star and champion bodybuilder [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) served as the state's governor for eight years - incidentally, also on the GOP ticket. However, it is probably a first for an animated character, especially since [Bikini Bottom](#) is not in the United States.

It's too bad whoever's behind this didn't list Spongebob's friend Patrick Star instead, since he [actually ran for president](#) in a special seven-episode Nickelodeon event in 2007, handily defeating his challenger, Larry the Lobster, in votes cast by fans.

However, everything about this story seems, well, fishy. For example, the person who filed the paperwork registered themselves as Perch Perkins, the famous field reporter for Bikini Bottom News in the TV show, and the address given is a Nickelodeon studio in Burbank, California. Also, the principal campaign committee is listed as the Krusty Krab, the restaurant where Spongebob works at on the show; its address is actually that of DirecTV's corporate office in El Segundo.

On Thursday, the FEC decided to find out what exactly was going on with this bizarre filing. [A letter sent](#) to the listed address - the Nickelodeon studio - carries a substantial warning about “knowingly and willfully making any materially false, fictitious, or fraudulent statement or representation to a federal government agency,” and seeking clarification about “the true, correct, or complete candidate name and principal campaign committee name.”

The letter, of course, is entirely real, as the FEC verified to Sputnik, but the listed response date of April 1 - April Fools Day in the United States - only adds to the surreal nature of this story. FEC press officer Judith Ingram told Sputnik that the agency began sending the letters out in 2017, and the recipient has 35 days to clarify the veracity of their filing. If they fail to do so, they [could face charges](#) that would result in a substantial fine and could land them in jail for up to five years - or even eight years, if the offense involves international or domestic terrorism.

The [rule was drafted](#) after the 2016 elections in which more than 1,850 joke candidates appeared, some of whom garnered not-insignificant results in polls, [such as Deez Nuts](#), who polled as high as 9% in some early presidential primaries.

Nickelodeon did not respond to inquiries by Sputnik.

Sputnik reached out to the email address listed on the FEC filing for the Krusty Krab, and this is the response we received:

“I'm Perch Perkins, the campaign manager for Mr. SquarePants. I wasn't aware about the name verification form, but I will let him know. The campaign will be announced within the next four weeks, with more details regarding his campaign via social media.”

On the extremely long shot that the jellyfishing, burger-flipping, gap-toothed sea sponge is, in fact, pursuing the nation's highest office, Sputnik is ready to sit down for an interview at the earliest available time.

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US Space Force Chief Sees 'Fused Connection' With Commercial Industry as Key to Success by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Because of its small size and high dependency on advanced technology, the US Space Force is perhaps better positioned than any branch of the US military to become a cash-cow for private industry.

A top US Space Force official has praised the falling costs of space flight in recent years, saying that nearly all of its space activities are now capable of being performed by private industry.

“If you look at historically what has been commercially viable in space, it was commercial launch and large communications satellites,” Chief of Space Operations Gen. [Jay Raymond said Thursday](#) at the Air Force Association Virtual Aerospace Warfare Symposium. But now, “almost every mission that we do in space has a commercially viable path.” “We want to build a very fused connection with commercial industry. We're a small service and we think we can do that,” Raymond added. “The explosion of commercial space ... provides us a great opportunity.”

A major factor driving prices downward has been miniaturization: the Pentagon's [lumbering GPS satellites](#) cost nearly \$600 million each and weigh more than 4,700 pounds. Further, they

get placed some 25,000 miles into space, making them among the most distant Earth-orbiting objects made by man. The huge contracts for such large objects are typically awarded to huge defense contractors like Lockheed Martin.

By contrast, private space transportation company [SpaceX launched some](#) 60 satellites for its Starlink broadband internet constellation last week on a single Falcon 9 rocket. Each of the small satellites is between 220 and 880 pounds each and costs less than \$500,000, [according to 2019 estimates](#).

The incredible efficiency of the Starlink satellites won the attention of the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which considered basing its [Blackjack spy satellites](#) on the Starlink system. Ultimately, however, DARPA [went with Blue Canyon](#), which was recently acquired by Raytheon and which received the go-ahead to begin building the first two Blackjack sats in December.

However, the shift isn't just being driven by raw budget concerns: the alleged development of [anti-satellite missiles](#) by several other nations including Russia, China, and India, has forced the Pentagon to think about disposability and replaceability in its space assets - and served as [the raison d'être](#) for a separate space-oriented branch of the US military, as well. In that situation, a huge satellite that takes years and tens of millions of dollars to produce simply isn't reliable. The Air Force's Space Enterprise Consortium, begun in 2017, also helped to shift the focus onto faster, cheaper alternatives that smaller defense firms could potentially meet.

The Space Force's first annual budget as a separate service, for fiscal year 2021 topped \$15.2 billion. For a new service branch with just 16,000 members, that's a huge budget, amounting to \$950,000 per service member. Of that budget, \$2.3 billion is for procurement and \$10.5 billion for research, development, testing and evaluation (RDT&E), [according to Space News](#). Those numbers are only [expected to grow](#), as the USSF's Space and Missile Systems Center chief, Lt. Gen. John Thompson, said in November he would be seeking a "plussed up" budget in 2022. Indeed, back in 2018 when then-US President Donald Trump began to talk seriously about forming the Space Force, Loren Thompson, a consultant with the nonprofit Lexington Institute, told [The Washington Post](#) the USSF "may be more dependent on industry for technical advice and policy input" as a separate branch than if it remained part of the Air Force, as US Space Command was at the time.

The Post noted that at the time, the Pentagon was spending roughly \$4 billion a year on procuring space vehicles. A subsequent [report by Bloomberg](#) from February 2020 noted that USSF annual procurements are expected to hit \$4.7 billion by 2025. In addition, the roughly 430 members of the Space Enterprise Consortium will have access to some \$12 billion in contracts over the next ten years, [according to C4ISRNET](#).

In addition to cheaper satellites, there is also a growing interest in space commerce that is also driving companies to explore easier, cheaper ways to traverse the 62-mile gap between the Earth's surface and space. Some, like Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin and [Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic](#), are looking to space tourism to cash in on the Great Expanse. However, the topic of space mining has also been breached in recent years, as an increasing number of probes are visiting asteroids and comets found to contain [quintillions of dollars](#) worth of minerals.

In October 2020, the US introduced a draft of [the Artemis Accords](#), a new international agreement outlining the rules for peaceful space exploration that Washington will require all participants in its Artemis lunar program to sign. The treaty has been criticized for allowing

nations to [keep resources mined](#) on other worlds, even while forbidding the claiming of extraterrestrial territories for Earth nations.

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Pentagon Leaders Can't Decide to Replace Falling-Apart E-3 Early Warning Plane
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

“Eyes in the sky” airborne radar systems are expected to be some of the first targets in a shooting war between major powers, and the preeminence of American systems has led Russia and China to develop long-range anti-radiation missiles dubbed “AWACS killers.” As the US Air Force’s E-3 Sentry airborne warning and control system (AWACS) gets older and more frail, Pentagon leaders are debating whether to continue extending its lifespan or move on to a replacement.

At a Wednesday roundtable during the Air Force Association’s Aerospace Warfare Symposium, Gen. Kenneth S. Wilsbach, head of Pacific Air Forces, urged the Pentagon to begin replacing its 31 Boeing E-3 Sentries with newer Boeing E-7 Wedgetails.

The huge Sentries, with their rotating, mushroom-like radomes atop their fuselage, are based on Boeing’s early 707 passenger airliner jets, and the first were introduced in 1971. By contrast, the E-7 was introduced in 2009, and is based on the smaller Boeing 737 airliner. Small numbers of Wedgetails have been built by Australia, the UK, Turkey, and South Korea, by [converting commercial 737s](#) and installing the necessary equipment.

“The fact is, we actually need something relatively quick because of the reliability of the E-3,” Wilsbach said, [according to Air Force Magazine](#). “It gets harder and harder to get airborne.” Indeed, the Sentry’s readiness record has gotten steadily worse over the last decade. A [Government Accountability Office report](#) from November 2020 noted that “from fiscal years 2011 through 2019, the E-3 fleet did not meet any of its annual aircraft availability goals, but met or exceeded its mission capable goals during 3 of the 9 fiscal years.”

The report further noted the E-3 program “faces sustainment challenges related to supply of needed parts and maintenance of the aging aircraft,” which had resulted in steadily decreasing mission times.

The parts shortage derives from Boeing having ended commercial production of the 707 way back in 1978, with only a relative handful of the jets still being used today. In addition the E-3, the Pentagon also flies the E-6 Mercury “doomsday plane” and the E-7 Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System ([Joint STARS](#)) battlefield management aircraft, which are also derivatives of the 707, and about which similar conversations about remaining shelf life are being had, according to [The War Zone](#).

By contrast, the E-7 is based on the Boeing 737, an aircraft still in commercial production and which is smaller, cheaper, and more reliable to use. The Pentagon has used the 737 as the basis for its [P-8 Poseidon](#) maritime patrol aircraft and C-40 Clipper, used variously for ferrying cargo, passengers, and VIPs.

In addition, the E-7's operate an active electronically scanned array (AESA), enabling them to scan the skies in multiple directions at once; the E-3's older pulse-doppler radar must slowly rotate as it scans a small angle of the sky at a time.

However, the issue is far from settled. During the same discussion, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. CQ Brown called it "premature" to commit to adopting the E-7 Wedgetail.

"I want to actually look at what options do we have," he said. "This is something I have to spend a little more time on looking at. But I realize there are some Wedgetail fans out there."

Officially, the E-3 is slated to continue [flying until 2035](#), and Brown's position comes from the same place as many others in [support of life-extension](#) over replacement across the US military, where budget crunches are a perennial phenomenon. In addition, the E-3s have been considered as partial replacements for the 16 E-8 Joint STARS alongside another system, although even that approach has been [met with trepidation](#) by lawmakers.

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Video: Province-Sized Iceberg Snaps Off Antarctica's Brunt Ice Shelf
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Studies by NASA and other researchers have found that warming ocean temperatures are responsible for melting more of the ice in polar ice shelves than are calving events, when pieces break off to become icebergs.

A colossal piece of ice has broken off an Antarctic glacier and is now floating into the Atlantic Ocean. According to British scientists, the snap has been building for more than a decade. Scientists at the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) have reported that a piece of ice 1,270 square kilometers and about 150 meters thick has broken off the Brunt Ice Shelf, one of the largest calving events ever recorded.

The piece of ice is about 20 times the size of New York City's Manhattan Island, or roughly the size of the English county of Bedfordshire, according to [a BAS press release](#). The scientists said they have been watching the glacier slowly crack for the past decade, but they knew something big was about to happen when new chasms started appearing in late 2020, with one advancing as much as 1 kilometer per day. They knew the iceberg had finally snapped off when the chasm very quickly advanced to several hundred meters in width on Thursday.

"This is a dynamic situation. Four years ago we moved Halley Research Station inland to ensure that it would not be carried away when an iceberg eventually formed. That was a wise decision," BAS director of operations Simon Garrod urged in the release. He said that since it is winter in Antarctica, no one is currently at the research station.

"Our job now is to keep a close eye on the situation and assess any potential impact of the present calving on the remaining ice shelf. We continuously review our contingency plans to ensure the safety of our staff, protect our research station, and maintain the delivery of the science we undertake at Halley," he said.

The scientists said it's unclear if the iceberg will run aground nearby, float near the ice shelf, or be whisked away by the currents. Another, even larger iceberg that snapped off the Larsen C

Ice Shelf in 2017 threatened to run aground [on South Georgia Island](#) late last year; the iceberg was roughly the same size as the island itself.

The Brunt Ice Shelf, which sits on the Weddell Sea, is the most watched ice shelf on Earth, with a network of 16 satellites from the US and European Union monitoring its activity. Since the ice shelf is already floating on the water, the calving event won't by itself cause any rise in sea level, as the [Thwaites "Doomsday" Glacier](#), on Marie Byrd Land, threatens to do.

Adrian Luckman, a researcher at Swansea University who tracks the ice shelf using satellite data, [told the BBC](#) that "Although the breaking off of large parts of Antarctic ice shelves is an entirely normal part of how they work, large calving events such as the one detected at the Brunt Ice Shelf on Friday remain quite rare and exciting."

"Time will tell whether this calving will trigger more pieces to break off in the coming days and weeks," he added. Indeed, the graphic shown in the BAS release notes another large chasm forming on the ice shelf.

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'Golden Calf Not Available?': Trump Statue at CPAC Bashed Online Over Idol Worship
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Conservative Police Action Conference (CPAC) is an annual event hosted by the American Conservative Union and attended by a variety of elected officials from across the nation. This year's event will likely serve as an opportunity for 2024 hopefuls looking to appeal and gain support from party members.

A golden statue of former US President Donald Trump appeared late on Thursday at CPAC in Orlando, Florida, quickly prompting a mass lifting of eyebrows as netizens highlighted its biblical undertones.

Video of the statue, which was captured and shared online by Bloomberg reporter William Turton, shows two individuals wheeling it away as event attendees cheer and even begin chanting, "four more years." Several onlookers are seen snapping photos and expressing their amazement at the sight.

As for the [golden statue](#) itself, the piece has Trump wearing his signature suit-and-tie stylings, but rather than being fitted with traditional slacks, the former commander-in-chief is seen wearing some flip-flops and shorts emblazoned with the American flag.

And yet, that's still not all that can be seen. The Trump statue also comes with its very own star-topped wand, which the sculpture is seen holding in its left hand. A copy of the US Constitution appears to be in the smiling statue's right hand.

Within moments of being shared, the floodgates were opened and with it came a slew of criticism from netizens who quickly began dishing out jokes about the infamous golden calf story from the Old Testament of the Bible.

In short, the [Old Testament scripture](#) touches on how Israelites worshipped a golden calf in the absence of Moses as he went up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. The story itself highlights the falsehoods of idolatry.

The annual political conference, which is scheduled to close out this weekend, will see Trump mark his first post-presidency appearance on Sunday, after having been acquitted by the Senate in his second impeachment trial.

Reports suggest that Trump may use the time to fire off a couple remarks against US President Joe Biden, and possibly begin leaving some breadcrumbs to his much-anticipated 2024 presidential bid.

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Researchers Develop Light-Emitting Tattoo That Could Be Used to Target Cancer Cells
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

An organic light-emitting diode (OLED) is an age-old technology that both TVs and smartphones use to offer individuals top-notch picture quality. However, a group of researchers recently determined that the matter can also be used for other, more vital purposes.

A team of researchers from the UK's University College London (UCL) and the Italian Institute of Technology have revealed that OLED technology can be used in combination with temporary tattoos, effectively providing health professionals with new methods to care for patients.

The study states the light-emitting technology could be mixed with other tattoo electronics to alert individuals when they need to seek shelter from the sun's rays to avoid severe burns, or in instances when an athlete may be nearing dehydration.

In other cases, the technology could even be tapped to signal when food has gone to waste instead of depending on the expiration date notation on products, which often vary across goods.

"The tattooable OLEDs that we have demonstrated for the first time can be made at scale and very cheaply," Franco Cacialli, the senior author of the study who also serves as a UCL professor, said in a statement accompanying a Friday [UCL release](#).

"They can be combined with other forms of tattoo electronics for a very wide range of possible uses. These could be for fashion - for instance, providing glowing tattoos and light-emitting fingernails."

"In healthcare, they could emit light when there is a change in a patient's condition - or, if the tattoo was turned the other way into the skin, they could potentially be combined with light-sensitive therapies to target cancer cells, for instance," he added.

According to the UCL release, the device developed by the team of researchers is only 2.3 micrometers thick, and consists of an electroluminescent polymer that sits between a pair of electrodes, with an insulating layer also fitted between the electrodes and commercial tattoo paper. The tech is then applied by simply dabbing the device with water.

Officials were able to successfully use the OLED device on a pane of glass, a plastic bottle, paper packaging and even an orange. The light emitted by the tech was green, researchers noted.

Cacialli further indicated in the UCL release that the team intends to study how they can extend the duration of the temporary OLED tattoos. Additionally, they hope to fuse “a battery or supercapacitor” to the device.

These findings [were published](#) in the recent edition of the journal of Advanced Electronic Material.

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US Officials Reportedly Raise Threat Level for Troops Stationed in Iraq After Recent Syria Strikes

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Biden Administration launched seven precision-guided missiles at facilities in eastern Syria on Thursday, later explaining the strike was in retaliation for at least three rocket attacks against Iraqi installations that house American forces and contractors. The Pentagon recently indicated the intended targets were “Iranian-backed militia.”

Leadership with the US’ Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve reportedly raised the threat level for American service members in Iraq on Friday over concerns that a response to the [US airstrikes](#) could be imminent.

Citing two sources familiar with the changes, Fox News [reported](#) that officials also placed American contractors stationed at the Balad Air Base on high alert, requiring all individuals on base to be fitted with protective gear when outside of “hardened” buildings.

Additionally, only “mission-essential” movement will be allowed at the base between the hours of 6:30 p.m. and 5 a.m. local time.

Although the recent changes may reportedly last for a period of several days, sources stated the move was a “routine precaution” in light of the current events. A source told the outlet that the “protection of coalition troops is the #1 priority, so taking force protection levels higher is wise and prudent.”

Earlier Friday, the US Defense Department stood firm in its decision to launch the strikes, with Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby [telling reporters](#) that the launch sent a “very clear signal that the US is going to protect its people, it’s going to protect its interests and it’s going to protect its partners.”

"It was very much a defensive operation," Kirby said, "as well as to send a strong signal about our resolve."

Kirby’s remarks were later echoed by US President Joe Biden, who [told reporters](#) that the strikes effectively informed Iran that “you can’t act with impunity,” and that Tehran must “be careful” with its choices.

Iran has condemned the US airstrikes and referred to the “aggressive attack” as a “violation of international law.” Saeed Khatibzadeh, the spokesperson for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, noted in a [statement](#) that the Thursday strikes violated both the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, and will only work to further destabilize the region.

The airstrikes are believed to have completely destroyed nine buildings and partially damaged two other facilities. As assessments are ongoing, an official death toll has not yet been confirmed.

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Los Angeles Police Release Description of Dognappers Who Took Lady Gaga's French Bulldogs
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier this week, reports surfaced detailing the grisly dognapping of Lady Gaga's two French bulldogs - Koji and Gustav - which also saw her friend and dog-walker Ryan Fischer critically wounded after being shot in the chest. The pair of suspects remain at-large. California's Los Angeles Police Department have released descriptions of the two individuals wanted for the shooting of Fischer and the theft of Lady Gaga's two beloved French bulldogs. Officials indicated in a late [Thursday release](#) that both suspects were described as Black males wearing dark clothing, and who were between the ages of 20 and 25. The suspect who shot Fischer was armed with a semi-automatic handgun and is said to have had blonde dreadlocks. Police further noted in the release that suspects had approached Fischer on North Sierra Bonita Avenue near Sunset Boulevard on Wednesday at roughly 9:40 p.m. local time after exiting a white Nissan Altima.

As the search for the suspects remains ongoing, police have been examining home surveillance footage of the violent attack that shows the exact moment the incident unfolded. The obtained recording documents Fischer being held down while he repeatedly shouts out for help before ultimately being shot in the chest.

Warning: Video contains material that some viewers may find disturbing.

"Oh my God, help me," Fischer is heard yelling out. "Help me, I've been shot. I've been shot. Oh my, God!"

At one point in the recording, Fischer is heard telling a nearby resident that "he's bleeding out," and that "they stole two dogs."

At the time, Fischer was walking all three dogs, but the third - Miss Asia - managed to get away during the scuffle. The dog has since been returned to Lady Gaga's team. Officials do not believe the suspects were motivated to steal the dogs because of their relation to Lady Gaga, but rather because the French bulldog breed is highly valuable at present.

Fischer's family offered an update on his condition on Friday, explaining in a [statement](#) to TMZ that he is expected to "make a full recovery."

Earlier, Lady Gaga spoke out for the first time on the dognapping via Twitter and told her followers that her "heart is sick and I am praying my family will be whole again with an act of kindness."

"If you bought or found them unknowingly, the reward is the same. I continue to love you Ryan Fischer, you risked your life to fight for our family. You're forever a hero," she added.

The singer-songwriter is currently offering a reward of \$500,000.

No further information regarding the suspects has been released by law enforcement officials.

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'Anatomically Impossible': Ted Cruz Claps Back After John Boehner Tells Him 'Go F**k Yourself' by [Evan Craighead](#)

Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) kicked off Friday with a slew of speeches from Republican heavyweights like Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Donald Trump, Jr. Former US President Donald Trump is slated to close out the conference on Sunday with a highly-anticipated address.

Cruz's Friday speech immediately kicked off with reference to his decision to travel [to Cancun](#) with his family amid recent bouts of extreme winter weather, power outages and related deaths in his home state.

"I gotta say, Orlando is awesome!" the lawmaker exclaimed to the in-person crowd. "It's not as nice as Cancun," he quipped, pausing for audience response, "but it's nice!"

The jokes kept coming as Cruz used his speech time at the conservative conference to comment on another hot topic: Former Rep. John Boehner's (R-OH) new audiobook.

It was revealed yesterday that Boehner, former speaker of the House of Representatives from 2011 to 2015, went off-script in several sections of his audio recording of his upcoming book, "On The House: A Washington Memoir."

"Oh, and Ted Cruz, go f**k yourself," Boehner remarks at one point, according to [Axios sources](#). "You know yesterday, John Boehner made some news. He suggested that I do something that was anatomically impossible," Cruz remarked before pulling a [Mariah Carey](#). "To which my response was, who's John Boehner?"

The Texas senator notably taunted Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in reference to the deadly January 6 riot on Capitol Hill.

"AOC is telling us she was murdered," he said to the crowd, receiving mixed reactions. The New York congresswoman [recently recounted](#) the storming of the capitol building in a live social media broadcast.

CPAC, which runs Friday through Sunday, comes at a divisive time for the diverse Republican Party.

Sen. Rick Scott (R-FL) declared in a [Tuesday memo](#) that the "Republican Civil War is now cancelled," referring to the recent fracturing of the party into pro- and anti-Trump factions.

"Some of you voted for President Trump enthusiastically, some with reservations, and some with great reluctance. It doesn't matter. We got 74 million votes, and we can easily add to our numbers if we work together," he wrote days ahead of the CPAC conference.

Scott's comments came after Trump took [several jabs](#) at McConnell last week - even [calling him](#) a "dour, sullen, and unsmiling political hack" who "will never do what needs to be done, or what is right for our Country."

"If Republican senators are going to stay with him, they will not win again," he said of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), who proclaimed on the Senate Floor that "there is no question" Trump was "practically and morally responsible" for inciting the deadly January 6 riot. Though Trump is set to close out CPAC with a highly-anticipated Sunday speech, neither McConnell nor former Vice President Mike Pence will be in attendance at the conference.

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McPlant? Beyond Meat Inks Deal with McDonald's, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut and KFC
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Impossible Foods, a competitor to fellow California plant-based meat substitute company Beyond Meat, and Burger King introduced the 'Impossible Whopper' in August 2019, giving vegetarians more options at the fast-food joint. Now, additional chain restaurants are exploring the addition of their own signature plant-based menu options.

Beyond Meat announced Thursday that it had finalized major distribution agreements with both McDonald's and Yum! Brands, the parent company of Pizza Hut, KFC, Taco Bell, The Habit Burger Grill and more fast-food brands.

The El Segundo-based company announced they would be expanding their previously limited partnerships with said companies, and expand their meatless menus under the distribution deals.

Speaking of the [McDonald's partnership](#), Beyond Meat Founder and CEO Ethan Brown expressed that he looks forward to serving the international company "as they bring expanded choice to menus globally."

"We will combine the power of Beyond Meat's rapid and relentless approach to innovation with the strength of McDonald's global brand to introduce craveable, new plant-based menu items that consumers will love," Brown pledged.

Presently, Beyond Meat and McDonald's plan to roll out their 'McPlant' - "a delicious burger that will be the first menu option in a plant-based platform," [according to](#) McDonald's International President Ian Borden.

The company previously tested a 'PLT' or 'plant, lettuce and tomato' burger in select locations.

"Our new McPlant platform is all about giving customers more choices when they visit McDonald's," said McDonald's Executive Vice President and Chief Supply Chain Officer Francesca DeBiase in the Thursday release. "We're excited to work with Beyond Meat to drive innovation in this space, and entering into this strategic agreement is an important step on our journey to bring delicious, high quality, plant-based menu items to our customers."

"We expect this Beyond Meat partnership to strengthen our brands' capability to offer delicious, plant-based menu items that are driven by consumer demand for more diverse protein options and our brands' strategies in local markets," Yum! Brands CFO Chris Turner said in [the release](#).

The news release highlighted that KFC "was the first US quick-service restaurant to introduce plant-based chicken" when it debuted buckets of 'Beyond Fried Chicken' in major southern US cities like Atlanta, Georgia, and Nashville, Tennessee, in 2019. will reportedly expand its meatless menu under the new distribution deal.

Similarly, Pizza Hut debuted the 'Beyond Italian Sausage Pizza' and the 'Great Beyond Pizza' nationwide last year.

Beyond Meat appears to be following in the footsteps of competitor Impossible Foods, which notably collaborated with Burger King to release the 'Impossible Whopper.'

The meatless burger debuted nationwide in August 2019 - following a limited rollout that began on April Fool's Day - but was [quickly rejected](#) by vegans due to the inclusion of mayonnaise, which includes eggs, and the fact that it was cooked on the same broiler as Burger King's chicken and beef products.

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James Charles Denies 16-Year-Old's 'Grooming' Allegations, Admits to Receiving 'Lewd' Pics From Teen
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier on Friday, an alleged 16-year-old posted a Twitter thread, entitled "my situation with James Charles," in which the user alleged that the popular social media influencer and beauty blogger, James Charles, had sent unsolicited, lewd photos and requested "hot" photos in return. Within hours Charles released an extensive statement, on Friday evening, responding to the allegations of grooming and pedophilia.

"There's a video going round about me on TikTok and Twitter of a guy calling me a groomer and I want to address it right away. The accusation that I have groomed this person is completely false," the influencer tweeted.

Charles' comments come after a user named Isaiyah, who is allegedly 16, took to Twitter to repost TikTok videos in which he accused Charles of sending unsolicited, sexually explicit images. The TikTok footage has since been removed from Twitter, but two tweets from the thread remain.

The final tweet in the thread features the alleged 16-year-old showing a Snapchat message being opened.

"Just watch you show off and look hot as f**k haha" reads the Snapchat picture message user Isaiyah alleged came from Charles.

According to Charles, Isaiyah "came across someone on my instagram explore [sic] page, saw he followed me, and added him on snapchat. The next morning, I woke up to several snaps from this person being excited I added him back, saying he loved me and also lewd photos of himself in the shower."

"I asked how old he was right away and he told me he was 18 so I started flirting back. In the excitement of meeting someone I though could be potentially great, I didn't ask for a cop of his

ID or passport," Charles wrote in his statement, adding that the alleged 16-year-old appears to have had an "ulterior motive from the beginning" because he was recording their exchanges. The social media influencer claimed that Isaiyah only "admitted he was 16" after being asked for a second time to confirm his age.

Charles concluded his statement by declaring that from now on he would "ask to see the ID or passport of every guy I have a conversation with."

Isaiyah has yet to directly address Charles' statements, but the alleged 16-year-old user tagged the influencer in a Twitter post, urging the 21-year-old to "make sure" he knows the age of people he texts.

"He added me on [Instagram], my insta has my tik tok which shows me [sic] age," Isaiyah tweeted along with a screenshot of his TikTok. He also posted [a photo](#) showing that his TikTok profile displayed his age, some 11 weeks ago.

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Russian Monastery in US Severely Damaged by Winter Storm, Left Without Power for 2 Weeks

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The severe winter storm that hit southeastern United States has resulted in significant material damage and caused an almost two week-long power outage to the Russian Orthodox Holy Cross monastery in West Virginia, the monastery Dean Hieromonk Gabriel (Hooten) told Sputnik.

"It has been almost two weeks without any power - no electricity, no telephones," father Gabriel said on Friday.

A heavy winter storm hit several US states in mid-February and caused prolonged power outages as well as food and water shortages for millions of resident amid the Arctic cold wave. Father Gabriel said subfreezing temperatures dominated for about a week-and-a-half causing a layer of ice an inch thick and trees breaking because of the cold - in a region in which freezing temperatures usually last for a couple of days. He pointed out that two buildings were hit by falling big trees and power lines were also affected by the cold.

"We had some damage to the buildings, one of the monastery vans was completely crushed by a huge tree... including one that fell on the roof directly over the Holy Altar, punctured through the roof into the ceiling. The hole was right over the Holy Table. Nobody was hurt, everyone is in good health and now we are able to come to the town of Wayne to get food and supplies," he said.

Father Gabriel explained the monks have not been able to get to all the structures because of safety conditions and can not at present find out how serious the damages are.

Electric companies said they hoped to restore power this weekend or early next week, but even if they do so, there is a big chance the Internet service will be resumed in several weeks.

"So it may be still several weeks until we are able to resume normal business activities and to be supporting ourselves like normal," he said.

Father Gabriel said the monks at the monastery support themselves by making incense, goat milk soap and candles and sell them online and the weather caused disruption impacts them significantly.

"Our ability to produce those things and sell them has been severely impacted, and it may be still several weeks until we are able to resume normal business activities and to be supporting ourselves like normal. Right now it is the main thing," he said.

The situation has been disruptive for those of us who need to live in monastic enclosure and core to the world just to do basic necessary things, he added.

The monastic community has begun restoring normal life but currently does not know the cost from the damages that will need to be repaired and suspension of sales. Father Gabriel assessed the losses to be at least \$30,000, but noted the estimate is preliminary.

"We were grateful to see how many people around the United States and even across the world sent us prayer and donations," he said.

Father Gabriel noted that the brotherhood sent several requests for help via email listings and website, and via the Russian Church Abroad assistance fund discussing the situation and possible ways to support the monastery.

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Biden Says US to Unveil 'Significant Changes' to Saudi Policy Over Khashoggi Murder

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in an interview said his administration will announce more significant changes on US policy toward Saudi Arabia following the murder of columnist Jamal Khashoggi.

"I spoke to the king yesterday, not the prince. I made it clear to him that the rules are changing, and we are going to announce significant changes today and Monday, we will hold them accountable for human rights abuses and make sure that, indeed, if they want to deal with us, they have to do it by dealing with human rights violations," Biden told Univision. "This [Khashoggi] report has been there, the last administration did not even publish it. Immediately when I walked in, we found the report, we read it, we got it and published it, we published it today, and it's outrageous what happened."

On Friday, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence published a declassified report saying that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman had approved an operation to assassinate Khashoggi in Istanbul in 2018.

Apart from exposing the Crown Prince's alleged role in Khashoggi's murder, the US government announced earlier on Friday that it will impose visa restrictions against 76 Saudi individuals deemed responsible for prosecution of dissidents overseas. In addition, the US government designated under the Global Magnitsky Act the so-called Rapid Intervention Force, bin Salman's elite personal protective detail.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted that the Biden administration is also reviewing US arms sales to Saudi Arabia in order to limit military supplies to those for defensive purposes and not to feed Riyadh's military campaign in neighboring Yemen.

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Biden to Virtually Meet Mexico's Obrador March 1 to Discuss Migration, Virus - White House

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will have a virtual bilateral meeting with Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on March 1, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a statement.

"On Monday, March 1, President Joe Biden will meet with President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. In this virtual event, the two leaders will discuss cooperation on migration, joint development efforts in Southern Mexico and Central America, COVID-19 recovery, and economic cooperation," Psaki said on Friday.

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US Advisory Panel Endorses Johnson & Johnson Single-Shot Coronavirus Vaccine

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - A US panel of experts voted in favor of a Johnson & Johnson coronavirus vaccine that is administered in a single shot.

The Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee voted unanimously during a livestream event on Friday to recommend the vaccine whose distribution requires final approval by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

If approved, Johnson & Johnson would become the third pharmaceutical company to have a coronavirus vaccine in the United States in addition to Pfizer and Moderna.

The FDA said it will work rapidly to finalize and issue an emergency use authorization for the vaccine.

The FDA has also notified federal partners involved in vaccine allocation and distribution so they can execute plans for a timely distribution.

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Russian Embassy in Canada Denounces Ottawa's Attempts to Question Status of Crimea

TORONTO, February 26 (Sputnik) - The Russian Embassy in Canada denounced as "clear interference" in Russia's internal affairs the refusal by Ottawa to recognize the country's sovereignty over Crimea.

Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau issued a statement earlier on Friday condemning Russia for what he described was an invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014.

"Reunification of Crimea with Russia is an obvious fact based on overwhelmingly expressed will by the Crimeans in full compliance with international law. Any attempts to falsify the reality and true history, meaning Crimea as a part of Russia since 1783, are clear interference in Russia's domestic affairs," the Russian Embassy said via Twitter on Friday evening.

Garneau also said that Canada will continue to maintain pressure on Russia until it "respects Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and international law."

In March 2014, Crimea rejoined Russia after 97 percent of residents voted to do so in a referendum. The majority of Western countries and Ukraine refuse to recognize the results of the referendum and have imposed sanctions against Russia.

Moscow has repeatedly said Crimea's residents decided to rejoin Russia through democratic means, adding that the referendum was conducted in compliance with international law and the will - and rights - of Crimea's residents must be respected.

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RPT - Migrants Deported, Turned Away on US-Mexico Border

JUAREZ, February 26 (Sputnik) - Several groups of asylum-seeking migrants were deported or turned away at the Paso Del Norte International Bridge between El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

Most of the migrants seen on Friday afternoon appeared to be families, mostly women and children.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki has said that due to the pandemic and the administration not having time to put in place humane process for processing asylum-seeking migrants, "now is not the time to come and the vast majority of people will be turned away." The United States began processing migrants February 19 at the port of entry between Tijuana, Mexico, and the US city of San Diego, California.

US Customs and Border Patrol (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.

Later on Friday, a group of 25 asylum-seeking migrants crossed into the United States at the Paso Del Norte International Bridge after being required to wait in Mexico under the now repealed Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program. They were the first to cross at this port of entry, which is one of the three entry points where MPP migrants will be processed in the United States.

About 25,000 asylum-seeking migrants have active cases under MPP and are eligible to cross into the United States to await their immigration hearings.

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Migrants Deported, Turned Away on US-Mexico Border Friday Afternoon

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US Seeks to Recalibrate, Not Rupture Relations With Saudi Arabia - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The United States seeks to recalibrate rather than rupture its relationship with Saudi Arabia by exposing Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's role in the murder of columnist Jamal Khashoggi, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters.

In his first public appearance after the publication of an unclassified intelligence report, Blinken reaffirmed the United States' commitments to the defense of Saudi Arabia and made it clear that US officials do not steer away from dealings with bin Salman himself.

"The relationship with Saudi Arabia is an important one. We have a significant ongoing interest. We remain committed to the defense of the kingdom. But we also want to make sure... that the relationship better reflects our interest and our values," Blinken said. "So what we have done by the actions that we have taken is really not to rupture the relationship, but to recalibrate it to be more in line with our interests and our values."

The US intelligence report accused bin Salman of approving the operation to kill Khashoggi in 2018. Apart from exposing the Crown Prince's alleged role in Khashoggi's murder, the US government announced earlier on Friday that it will impose visa restrictions against 76 Saudi individuals deemed responsible for prosecution of dissidents overseas. In addition, the US government designated under the Global Magnitsky Act the so-called Rapid Intervention Force, bin Salman's elite personal protective detail.

Blinken noted that the Biden administration is also reviewing US arms sales to Saudi Arabia in order to limit military supplies to those for defensive purposes and not to feed Riyadh's military campaign in neighboring Yemen.

"We are reviewing these arms sales to make sure that going forward what we do provide goes to the defense of the kingdom, not its ability to prosecute offensive operations," Blinken said.

When asked whether the United States will stop interacting with bin Salman, Blinken said the relationship between the states is bigger than any one individual and noted that the Crown Prince recently talked over the telephone with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

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Johnson would become the third pharmaceutical company to have a vaccine against the novel coronavirus approved in the United States after Pfizer and Moderna.

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Biden Says US Airstrikes in Syria Send Message to Iran to 'Be Careful' - Pool Reports

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden told reporters that by ordering airstrikes in Syria he was trying to send Iran a message that it cannot act with impunity and should be careful.

"You can't act with impunity," Biden said according to a pool report. "Be careful."

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Russian Monastery in US Severely Damaged by Winter Storm, Left Without Power for 2 Weeks

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The severe winter storm that hit southeastern United States has resulted in significant material damage and caused an almost two week-long power outage to the Russian Orthodox Holy Cross monastery in West Virginia, the monastery Dean Hieromonk Gabriel (Hooten) told Sputnik.

"It is been almost two weeks without any power - no electricity, no telephones," father Gabriel said on Friday.

A heavy winter storm hit several US states, of which Texas was particularly affected, more than two weeks ago and caused prolonged power outages as well as food and water shortages for millions of resident amid the Arctic cold wave.

West Virginia faced the most serious crisis the week of February 15, when the Russian Orthodox believers celebrate the fest of Meeting of the Lord.

Father Gabriel said subfreezing temperatures dominated for about a week-and-a-half causing a layer of ice an inch thick and trees breaking because of the cold - in a region in which freezing temperatures usually last for a couple of days. He pointed out that two buildings were hit by falling big trees and power lines were also affected by the cold.

"We had some damage to the buildings, one of the monastery vans was completely crushed by a huge tree... including one that fell on the roof directly over the Holy Altar, punctured through the roof into the ceiling. The hole was right over the Holy Table. Nobody was hurt, everyone is in good health and now we are able to come to the town of Wayne to get food and supplies," he said.

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Electric companies said they hope to restore power this weekend or early next week, but even if they do so, there is a big chance the internet service will be resumed in several weeks.

Father Gabriel said the monks at the monastery support themselves by making incense, goat milk soap and candles and sell them online and the weather caused disruption impacts them significantly.

"Our ability to produce those things and sell them has been severely impacted, and it may be still several weeks until we are able to resume normal business activities and to be supporting ourselves like normal. Right now it is the main thing," he said.

The situation has been disruptive for those of us who need to live in monastic enclosure and core to the world just to do basic necessary things, he added.

The monastic community has begun restoring normal life but currently does not know the cost from the damages that will need to be repaired and suspension of sales. Father Gabriel assessed the losses to be at least \$30,000, but noted the estimate is preliminary.

"We were grateful to see how many people around the United States and even across the world sent us prayer and donations," he said.

Father Gabriel noted that the brotherhood sent several requests for help via email listings and website, and via the Russian Church Abroad assistance fund discussing the situation and possible ways to support the monastery.

During the first week of the weather crisis, the monks were able to complete only a small part of the monastic observance of divine service during, he said.

"Thankfully, now we are able to resume normal schedule, as far as the services go," he added.

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Asylum-Seeking Migrants Cross Into US After 2 Years Under Remain in Mexico Policy

JUAREZ, February 26 (Sputnik) - A group of 25 asylum-seeking migrants crossed into the United States after being required to wait in Mexico under the now repealed Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

About 25,000 asylum-seeking migrants have active cases under MPP and are eligible to cross into the United States to await their immigration hearings. The 25 crossed over on Friday.

The United States began processing migrants February 19 at the port of entry between Tijuana, Mexico, and the US city of San Diego, California.

President Joe Biden terminated MPP immediately after he came into office last month, however, the White House has warned other migrants that they will be turned away at ports of entry because immigration policies are currently under review.

Hours before MPP migrants crossed the Paso Del Norte International Bridge between El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico, two groups of about 20 asylum-seeking migrants were turned away by US immigration authorities.

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Canada Will Review US Khashoggi Report, Wants Full Saudi Inquiry Into Murder - Minister

TORONTO, February 26 (Sputnik) - Canada will review the US intelligence report on the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey but wants to see a full Saudi Arabian inquiry into the assassination, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said.

On Friday, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence published a declassified report saying that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman had approved an operation to assassinate Khashoggi in Istanbul in 2018.

"We will look at the report that has been published, today," Garneau told reporters on Friday.

"But the fact remains, Canada wants the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to allow a full inquiry so that we can get to the bottom of what actually happened."

Garneau added that he, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and tasked with signing off on military export permits, will not hesitate to suspend permits to Saudi Arabia if there is any "hint" of human rights being violated."

Saudi Arabia has strongly refuted the information about the alleged role of the Kingdom's leadership in Khashoggi's murder. According to the Foreign Ministry, the kingdom has already convicted and sentenced those responsible for the death of Khashoggi.

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.

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US Stocks End Week Broadly Lower, Nasdaq Suffers Worst Week in 4 Months

NEW YORK, February 26 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street fell broadly for the week, with technology index Nasdaq posting its worst weekly loss in four months, as players slashed risk and took profit on overpriced companies.

Nasdaq, which includes stocks of tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, closed down almost 5 percent on the week at 13,192. The last time Nasdaq fell more was during the week to October 25, when it lost 5.5 percent. Just a week ago, the tech-heavy index hit a record high of 14,175.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, closed the week down 2.4 percent at 3,813. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest gauge of the New York Stock Exchange, fell 1.8 percent on the week at 30,932.

Nasdaq was the favorite target of sellers for one reason - it had run way ahead of the Dow and S&P 500. Despite the tech-heavy index rebounding 0.6 percent on Friday - while the Dow fell 1.5 percent on the day and S&P500 slid 0.5 percent - Nasdaq's weekly loss persisted.

Nasdaq's fall from grace came as the yield on US bonds' benchmark 10-year note surged above the 1.6 percent this week, a level only seen previously in February 2020, before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

Bond yields spiked as weekly US jobless claims fell to November lows. The better employment scenario raised expectations that the economy may rebound faster than thought from the COVID-19 pandemic, triggering investor rotation out of long-profitable but pricey tech stocks and into undervalued companies that could benefit from a broader recovery.

"It's a bit of a wild end to the week," Craig Erlam, markets strategist at New York-based brokerage OANDA, said. "We are heading for a super-charged recovery, after all, thanks to the vaccine rollout and all the fiscal support measures over the last 12 months."

Despite the large weekly loss, Nasdaq maintains a 2.4 percent gain on the year. The S&P500 is up 1.5 percent year-to-date while the Dow has an annual gain of just 1.1 percent.

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US VP Harris, Congo Leader Agree to Boost Fight Against Disease Outbreaks - White House

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris and President Felix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) agreed in a telephone conversation to boost bilateral cooperation in expanding health security and combating COVID-19 and Ebola, the White House said in a readout.

"They discussed COVID-19, the recent Ebola outbreaks, and economic opportunity. They committed to work together to strengthen health security," the readout said Friday.

Harris and Tshisekedi also agreed to increase regional trade and investment, promote human rights and good governance and to address the challenges of climate change, the White House said.

"The Vice President emphasized the serious concern of the United States about reports of significant human rights violations and a deteriorating humanitarian crisis in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. They agreed to collaborate to reduce conflict, support dialogue, and secure peace in eastern DRC and the region," the release said.

Harris committed to working with the DRC government to advance girls' education and to bolster economic opportunities for all Congolese and she congratulated Tshisekedi on becoming chairman of the African Union (AU), the White House added.

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US Signs Memorandum of Understanding to Facilitate Defense Cooperation With Macedonia

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Macedonia to expand bilateral defense cooperation, the US Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"The United States Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Dr. Mara Karlin, and the Minister of Defense of the Republic of North Macedonia, Radmila

Shekerinska, co-signed a Memorandum of Understanding to facilitate defense cooperation today," the release said on Friday.

After the signing, Karlin and Shekerinska held a phone conversation and discussed the upcoming one-year anniversary of Macedonia's accession to NATO and opportunities to further strengthen the partnership, the release added.

The MoU highlights current avenues of bilateral cooperation and signals the intent to build on the strategic relationship by promoting joint training and exercises, enhancing counterterrorism capabilities, increasing professional military education and exchange opportunities, and improving interoperability," according to the release.

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Canadian Foreign Minister Condemns Russian 'Annexation' of Crimea - Statement

TORONTO, February 26 (Sputnik) - Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau issued a statement in which he condemned Russia allegedly invading and annexing Crimea.

"As we mark Ukraine's Day of Resistance to the Occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Canada reiterates its unequivocal condemnation of Russia's illegal invasion and annexation of Crimea," the Garneau said in the statement on Friday.

Garnuea also said that Canada will continue to maintain pressure on Russia until Moscow "respects Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and international law."

In March 2014, Crimea rejoined Russia after nearly 97 percent of voters supported the move in a referendum. The majority of Western countries and Ukraine refuse to recognize the results of the referendum and have imposed sanctions against Russia.

Moscow has repeatedly said Crimea's residents decided to rejoin Russia through democratic means, adding that the referendum was conducted in compliance with international law and the will - and rights - of Crimea's residents must be respected.

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US Stocks End Week Broadly Lower; Nasdaq Suffers Worst Week in 4 Months

NEW YORK, February 26 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street fell broadly for the week, with technology index Nasdaq posting its worst loss since late October, as players slashed risk and took profit on four straight months of gains.

Nasdaq, which includes stocks of tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, closed down almost 5 percent at 13,192.34 on Friday. That was the worst weekly loss for Nasdaq since the week ending October 25, when it lost 5.5 percent. The tech-heavy index hit a record high just a week ago, touching 14,175.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, closed the week down 2.4 percent at 3,813. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest gauge of the New York Stock Exchange, fell 1.8 percent to 30,932.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) -

US-SAUDI RELATIONS

- * The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence published a declassified report on Friday saying that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman approved an operation to assassinate Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, Turkey.
- * The United States imposed sanctions on former deputy head of the Saudi intelligence Ahmed al-Asiri and the Rapid Intervention Force, the kingdom's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's elite personal protective detail, the Treasury announced on Friday.
- * The United States has introduced a new visa restriction policy called the Khashoggi Ban, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.
- * The United States will impose visa restrictions on 76 Saudi individuals who have been engaged in threatening dissidents overseas, including the late columnist Jamal Khashoggi, Blinken said.

US AIRSTRIKES IN SYRIA

- * The US military operation in Syria on Thursday utilized two F-15 fighter jets to drop seven precision-guided munitions to fully or partially destroy 11 facilities used by Iranian-backed militias in Syria, Defense Department spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Friday.
- * The United States informed Russia through the deconfliction channel about Thursday's airstrike in eastern Syria that targeted Iran-backed militia groups, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said in an interview on Friday.
- * Syria condemns in the strongest terms the recent US airstrike on areas near the Iraqi border describing the move as a "cowardly" act, the country's Foreign Ministry said, adding that such actions will result in the escalation of tensions in the region.
- * Iran considers the US strike on Syria an aggression and a violation of international law, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said in a statement.

ARMENIA DEVELOPMENTS

- * An aide to Armenian President Armen Sarkisyan told Sputnik he had not sent back to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan his request to have the chief of General Staff fired.
- * Sarkisyan visited the General Staff to meet with its chief, Onik Gasparyan, whose dismissal was requested by Pashinyan, the presidential press service said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* The Argentinian government announced on Friday that it will manufacture Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine following a deal signed between the representative of Moscow's Gamaleya Institute and Argentina's pharmaceutical company Laboratorios Richmond and India's Hetero Labs Limited, sources at the presidential office of Casa Rosada told Sputnik.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz discussed the potential shipment of Russia's coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V to Austria and the potential of jointly producing it, the Kremlin said.

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US Vice President, Denmark PM Agree to Boost Arctic, NATO Policies - White House

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris and Denmark Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen agreed to close bilateral efforts to boost their interests in the Arctic Ocean and and strengthen NATO, the White House said in a readout on Friday.

"Vice President Kamala Harris spoke today with Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen of Denmark," the readout said. "[They agreed on] close bilateral and multilateral cooperation to address COVID-19, combat climate change, advance common interests in the Arctic and High North, enhance energy security, and strengthen NATO."

Harris expressed her commitment to strengthening the steadfast alliance between the Kingdom of Denmark and the United States, the White House continued.

"The Vice President thanked Denmark for its contributions to NATO missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its commitment to democracy and international development," the readout said.

Harris and Frederiksen also discussed in depth the importance of supporting women's full participation in the workforce to strengthen our economies, the White House noted.

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US Stock Market Regulator SEC Suspends Trading in 15 Companies Over Social Media Action

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The Securities and Exchange Commission, regulator of the US stock market, announced on Friday that it has suspended trading in 15 companies that engaged in questionable trading and social media activity.

"The SEC's recent suspensions of trading in nearly two dozen securities - including 15 today - are one facet of our ongoing efforts to police the market and protect investors," Melissa Hodgman, acting director at SEC's division of enforcement, said in a statement. "We proactively monitor for suspicious trading activity tied to stock promotions on social media, and act quickly to stop that trading when appropriate to safeguard the public interest."

The 15 companies were identified as Bebida Beverage Co; Blue Sphere Corporation; Ehouse Global Inc; Eventure Interactive Inc; Eyes on the Go Inc; Green Energy Enterprises Inc; Helix Wind Corp; International Power Group Ltd; Marani Brands Inc; MediaTechnics Corp; Net Talk.com Inc; Patten Energy Solutions Group Inc; PTA Holdings Inc; Universal Apparel & Textile Company; and Wisdom Homes of America Inc.

The suspensions came on the heels of similar action enforced on securities of other companies believed to have been targets of social media attempts to artificially inflate stock prices, the SEC said.

The regulator said it routinely reviews market and trading data for such activity in the public interest and to protect investors. "We also remind investors to exercise caution and do their diligence before investing generally, including in companies promoted on social media," Hodgman added.

Under the federal securities laws, the SEC can suspend trading in a stock for 10 days and generally prohibit a broker-dealer from soliciting investors to buy or sell the stock again until certain reporting requirements are met, the statement said.

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Canadian Pension Plan CEO Resigns After Jumping COVID-19 Vaccination Line Abroad

TORONTO, February 26 (Sputnik) - The head of Canada's Pension Plan Investment Board (CPPIB) has resigned after it was revealed that he traveled to the United Arab Emirates to be vaccinated against COVID-19 ahead of schedule, CPPIB's board of directors announced on Friday.

On Thursday, it was revealed the CPPIB CEO Mark Machin traveled on his own accord to the UAE, where he remains today with his partner, opting to be vaccinated against the deadly disease ahead of the domestic immunization schedule, which remains fraught with setbacks. "Recently, our CEO Mark Machin decided to travel personally to the United Arab Emirates where he arranged to be vaccinated against COVID-19. After discussions last evening with the Board, Mr. Machin tendered his resignation and it has been accepted," the statement said. The board thanked Machin for his leadership and said that his accomplishments helped strengthen Canadians' retirement income security.

A spokeswoman for Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland, who is responsible for appointing directors to the CPPIB, expressed the minister's and her department's disappointment with the development.

"While the CPPIB is an independent organization, we are very disappointed by this troubling situation and we support the swift action taken by the board of directors," Katherine Cuplinskis, Freeland's press secretary, said in a statement as quoted by PressTV.

The government has repeatedly warned Canadians not to travel abroad during the pandemic. John Graham has been appointed as the new CEO of Canada's crown corporation that manages the accounts of over 20 million contributors and beneficiaries of the Canada Pension Plan. The CPPIB manages \$373.98 billion in pension funds, according to the corporation.

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UPDATE - UN Chief Calls for Immediate, Unconditional Release of Schoolgirls in Nigeria - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned in the strongest terms the abduction of more than 300 schoolgirls in northwest Nigeria and called for their immediate and unconditional release, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Friday.

"The Secretary-General condemns in the [the students' kidnapping] in strongest possible terms and calls for their immediate and unconditional release," Dujarric said during a press briefing. On Thursday, militants abducted more than 300 schoolgirls in Nigeria's Zamfara state, according to local media.

Guterres urged the Nigerian authorities to do their utmost to ensure that the perpetrators of the crime are brought to justice. He also reminded that attacks on schools constitute a grave violation of human rights.

The UN chief further reaffirmed the support of the world's body to Nigeria in the fight against terrorism and organized crime.

Bandits and terrorists regularly kill and abduct school children in the north of Nigeria to demand ransom, but more often for religious reasons. The most recent attack comes three months after the Islamic terror group Boko Haram abducted more than 300 schoolboys before law enforcement rescued them.

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EU States at UN Urge Israel to Halt Demolitions of Structures in Jordan Valley - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - Estonia, France, Ireland, Belgium, Germany, Norway and the United Kingdom at the United Nations in a statement on Friday urged Israel to stop demolition and confiscation of property in a Palestinian community in the Jordan Valley.

"We are deeply concerned at the recent repeated demolitions and confiscation of items, including of EU and donor funded structures carried out by Israeli authorities at Humsa Al-Bqai'a in the Jordan Valley," the statement said. "We reiterate our call on Israel to halt demolitions and confiscations."

The recent demolitions impacted the community of approximately 70 people, including 41 children, the statement said.

It also expressed the call on Israel to allow full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to the community in Humsa Al-Baqai'a.

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UN Special Rapporteur Urges US to Take Lead in Ensuring Justice for Khashoggi's Murder

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions Agnes Callamard on Friday urged Washington to take the lead in ensuring accountability for Saudi Arabia's involvement in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Earlier in the day, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence in its report assessed that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman approved an operation to assassinate the Saudi journalist in Istanbul, Turkey.

"With the release of the US report, confirming Saudi officials culpability at the highest levels, the United States should now take the lead in ensuring accountability for this crime and for setting in place the international mechanisms to prevent and punish such acts in the future," Callamard said in a statement.

She also said the United States should not grant the Crown Prince immunity from civil suits, given he is not the head of state, and ensure that all information about the killing is declassified to the "fullest extent possible."

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Biden Admin. Must Explain Not 'Coming to Congress' for Syria Airstrikes - US Senator

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration must explain its rationale for carrying out airstrikes in Syria without Congressional approval, US Senator Tim Kaine said in a statement on Friday.

"The American people deserve to hear the administration's rationale for these strikes and its legal justification for acting without coming to Congress," Kaine said. "Offensive military action without congressional approval is not constitutional, absent extraordinary circumstances. Congress must be fully briefed on this matter expeditiously."

Late on Thursday, the United States carried out airstrikes against facilities used by Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria in response to the February 15 rocket attack on US troops in Iraq.

Iranian state media reported on Friday that 17 people were killed in the strikes. However, Iraqi lawmaker Kataa al-Rikabi then told to Sputnik the strikes hit a warehouse and no one was injured.

White House Press Secretary Jan Psaki said the airstrikes were aimed at sending a message that President Joe Biden and his administration will act to protect Americans.

The action was also deliberately aimed at de-escalating tensions in the region, Psaki added.

Syria's foreign ministry said on Friday that it condemned in the strongest terms the US airstrikes, describing them as a "cowardly" act that will result in the escalation of tensions in the region.

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UNSC Adopts Resolution Urging Ceasefire Amid COVID-19 Vaccination - Russian Mission to UN

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - The Russian Permanent Mission to the United Nations said the Security Council unanimously adopted on Friday a resolution calling for a ceasefire in conflict areas to provide safe distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

"The Russian delegation welcomes the unity of the UN Security Council in the face of the global challenge associated with COVID-19," the mission said in a statement. "the adoption of a resolution on the important topic of vaccination of population in situations of armed conflict sends a significant message to the entire international community."

The document, submitted by the United Kingdom, urges that all sides in armed conflicts worldwide immediately commit to a safe, durable and sustainable humanitarian pause to facilitate the delivery and distribution of COVID-19 vaccine. It also urges warring parties to provide humanitarian and medical workers full access to enable vaccination.

The Russian mission welcomed the fact that, while calling for a general ceasefire, the resolution did not apply the call for pause to military operations against terrorist groups, designated by the UN Security Council.

The resolution also reiterated the call made previously by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres for an immediate ceasefire amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The text, backed by more than 100 UN member states, will help provide vaccinations to some 160 million people residing in areas with ongoing armed conflict.

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Pentagon Believes Properly Notified Russia About US Strikes in Syria - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The United States believes it properly notified Russia ahead of its airstrikes in Syria without compromising the security of the mission, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby responded on Friday to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's criticism of the US short-term warning regarding the attack.

"Without getting into the details, it shouldn't come as a shock to anybody that we are going to do what we have to do to notify, but we also going to do what we have to do to protect our forces, in this particular case the air forces that were conducting this strike. There is a matter of operational security that we take very seriously," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Lavrov said earlier that the warning through the deconfliction channel came four or five minutes ahead of the attack of two US F-15 fighter jets on the infrastructure of Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria. The strike came in retaliation for Iran's rocket attack on the Erbil Air Base in Iraq. "We did what we believe was a proper amount of notification," Kirby said, adding that he is grateful to Lavrov for his willingness to confirm that the notification was served.

"As for Foreign Minister Lavrov, I won't get into specifics of exactly the timing that was involved here, but I am grateful to see that the Foreign Minister confirmed what I have been saying for the last couple of hours that they were in fact informed through the deconfliction channel. So I am grateful that he was willing to confirm that," Kirby said.

Lavrov also said the US presence in Syria is illegal and violates all norms of international law.

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Pentagon Notified Congress Ahead of Thursday Airstrike in Syria - White House

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department briefed leaders in Congress about Thursday's airstrike in eastern Syria prior to carrying out the attack, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"The Department of Defense briefed Congressional leadership before the action last night," Psaki said in a statement.

Psaki said the Biden administration has been briefing lawmakers and staffers on Capitol Hill on Friday, adding that they will receive a full classified briefing early next week at the latest.

Late on Thursday, the Defense Department said that the United States had targeted the infrastructure used by Iranian-backed militias – including Kait'ib Hezbollah and Kait'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada – in eastern Syria. Washington added that the strike was conducted in retaliation for the February 15 rocket attack on the Erbil Air Base in Iraqi Kurdistan.

US Senator Tim Kaine earlier on Friday called on the Biden administration for an explanation of the "offensive" action.

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US to Impose Visa Restrictions on 76 Saudis Over Threats to Dissidents Overseas - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will impose visa restrictions on 76 Saudi individuals who have been engaged in threatening dissidents overseas, including the late columnist Jamal Khashoggi, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"The US Department of State has taken action pursuant to the Khashoggi Ban to impose visa restrictions on 76 Saudi individuals believed to have been engaged in threatening dissidents overseas, including but not limited to the Khashoggi killing," Blinken said in a press release.

The action is part of the United States's new visa restriction policy called the Khashoggi Ban.

Blinken said Saudi Arabia's threats and assaults against activists, dissidents and journalists must end.

Earlier on Friday, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence published a declassified report saying that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman approved an operation to assassinate Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, Turkey.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Ex-Saudi Intelligence Official, Crown Prince's Guards - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed sanctions on former deputy head of the Saudi intelligence Ahmed al-Asiri and the Rapid Intervention Force, the kingdom's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's elite personal protective detail, the Treasury announced on Friday.

Both designations under the Global Magnitsky Act came after the US released an intelligence report that accused bin Salman of approving the operation to kill Saudi-American dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

Al-Asiri was fired from his position of the deputy head of general intelligence over the Khashoggi murder. The US also believes that the team of executioners included seven members of the Rapid Intervention Force, which it describes as a subset of the Saudi Royal Guard which answers only to the Crown Prince, and had directly participated in earlier dissident suppression operations at his direction.

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United Airlines to Pay Nearly \$50Mln to Settle International Mail Fraud - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - United Airlines, the world's third largest airline, has been fined nearly \$50 million to settle criminal charges and civil claims relating to fraud on postal service contracts involving international mail, the US Justice Department said on Friday. "United Airlines Inc. (United), the world's third largest airline, has agreed to pay over \$49 million to resolve criminal charges and civil claims relating to fraud on postal service contracts for transportation of international mail," the Justice Department said in a statement.

Detailing the case, the Justice Department said between 2012 and 2015 United Airlines defrauded the US Postal Service (USPS) by submitting false delivery scan data.

United Airlines submitted automated delivery scans based on aspirational delivery times, and some individuals sought "to hide the automation practices included efforts to revise the falsified delivery times to make the automated scans appear less suspicious to USPS," the statement added.

United Airlines reached a non-prosecution agreement in 2016 relating to potential criminal bribery violations arising out of its establishment and operation of a non-stop route between Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey and Columbia Metropolitan Airport in South Carolina, according to the statement.

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Blinken Announces New US Visa Restriction Policy Dubbed 'Khashoggi Ban'

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has introduced a new visa restriction policy called the Khashoggi Ban, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday. "Today I am announcing the 'Khashoggi Ban'... The Khashoggi Ban allows the State Department to impose visa restrictions on individuals who, acting on behalf of a foreign government, are believed to have been directly engaged in serious, extraterritorial counter-dissident activities, including those that suppress, harass, surveil, threaten, or harm journalists, activists, or other persons perceived to be dissidents for their work, or who engage in such activities with respect to the families or other close associates of such persons," Blinken said in a press release.

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US to Impose Visa Restrictions on 76 Saudis Over Threats to Dissidents Overseas - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will impose visa restrictions on 76 Saudi individuals who have been engaged in threatening dissidents overseas, including the late columnist Jamal Khashoggi, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday. "The US Department of State has taken action pursuant to the Khashoggi Ban to impose visa restrictions on 76 Saudi individuals believed to have been engaged in threatening dissidents overseas, including but not limited to the Khashoggi killing," Blinken said in a press release.

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UN Chief Calls for Immediate, Unconditional Release of Schoolgirls in Nigeria - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned in the strongest terms the abduction of more than 300 schoolgirls in northwest

Nigeria and called for their immediate and unconditional release, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Friday.

"The Secretary-General condemns in the [the students' kidnapping] in strongest possible terms and calls for their immediate and unconditional release," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

On Thursday, militants abducted more than 300 schoolgirls in Nigeria's Zamfara state, according to local media.

Bandits and terrorists regularly kill and abduct school children in the north of Nigeria to demand ransom, but more often for religious reasons. The most recent attack comes three months after the Islamic terror group Boko Haram abducted more than 300 schoolboys before law enforcement rescued them.

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White House Says Syria Airstrikes Send 'Unambiguous Message' - Pool Report

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The US airstrikes in Syria send a clear message that President Joe Biden will protect Americans, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

The strike sends an "unambiguous" message that Biden "is going to act to protect Americans," Psaki said, according to the pool report.

Late on Thursday, the Defense Department said US strikes targeted infrastructure used by Iranian-backed militias - including Kait'ib Hezbollah and Kait'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada - in eastern Syria. Washington added that the strike was conducted in retaliation for the February 15 rocket attack on the Erbil Air Base in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iranian state media reported on Friday that 17 people were killed in the bombing. However, Iraqi lawmaker Kataa al-Rikabi then said to Sputnik that no one was injured, as the strike hit a warehouse. The New York Times reported that one Kataib Hezbollah fighter was killed citing a militia official.

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Trudeau Says Canada Secured 2Mln Doses of Indian Version of AstraZeneca Vaccine

TORONTO, February 26 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has secured 2 million doses of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine version produced by India's Serum Institute, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, Canadian health regulators authorized the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine along with the Serum Institute version of the vaccine.

"Canada has secured two million doses of the Covishield vaccine through an agreement with Verity Pharmaceuticals and the Serum Institute of India," Trudeau told reporters.

Procurement Minister Anita Anand said the first shipment of 500,000 vaccine doses will arrive in the "coming days." The remaining 1.5 million doses will arrive by mid-May, according to a Public Services and Procurement Canada.

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UN Says Ready to Send Humanitarian Assessment Team to Karabakh at Earliest Opportunity

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations stands ready to deploy a mission to Nagorno-Karabakh to assess the humanitarian situation in the region at the earliest opportunity and has notified all relevant actors about it, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Friday.

"We have been ready to deploy an initial independent interagency humanitarian assessment mission to Nagorno-Karabakh and other conflict-affected areas in the earliest opportunity. We have informed all relevant actors in that regard," Dujarric said.

The mission aims to examine the humanitarian situation on the ground and the conditions for a safe and voluntary return of all people displaced by the conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh last year.

Dujarric said UN agencies continue to engage with all concerned parties to identify the specific timing for deploying the mission.

"We call on relevant groups to cooperate fully with the UN entities to ensure their unfettered and speedy access to conduct such a mission, which will be solely based on the humanitarian principles," Dujarric added.

The fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan that broke out in late September had displaced more than 90,000 civilians of which around 25,000 have already returned to their homes.

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US to Sanction 76 Saudi Nationals Over Khashoggi Murder – Bloomberg

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) – The United States has drawn up a list of 76 Saudi Arabian nationals who it could sanction under a new policy named after slain journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Bloomberg reported on Friday, citing State Department documents.

The State Department identified the possible sanctions targets as part of its new "Khashoggi policy," which it described in documents circulated to US lawmakers and obtained by the outlet.

Under the policy, the United States will seek to impose restrictions on individuals "directly engaged in serious, extraterritorial counter-dissident activities" at the behest of foreign governments.

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Biden to Maintain Trump Administration Rules to Limit China Tech Purchases - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration plans to maintain and impose sweeping new rules to limit China's purchase of advanced technology from the United States, The Wall Street Journal reported on Friday.

The tough new regulations enacted under President Donald Trump are still going to go into effect in March, despite objections from the US business community claiming they are too onerous, too sweeping and will be impossible to enforce, the report said citing people familiar with the matter.

The rule, which was proposed in November 2020, will empower the Department of Commerce with the authority to ban technology-related business transactions that it decides present a national security threat as part of Biden's announced program to secure US supply chains for critical technology and raw materials, the Journal said.

US companies specializing in technology, telecommunications and finance oppose the new rule arguing that it could prevent innovation and hurt competitiveness, but the Biden administration is determined to enforce it, fearing that failure to do so would send a message of weakness to Beijing, the report said.

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Canada Privy Council Says Informed of Top Military Officer Abuse Charges Before Suspension

TORONTO, February 26 (Sputnik) - Canada's Privy Council Office was informed of misconduct allegations made against the country's top military commander before he temporarily stepped down, PCO spokesperson Beatrice Fenelon told Sputnik.

Earlier this week, Canada's Chief of Defense Staff Admiral Art McDonald temporarily stepped amid a probe into misconduct allegations that, according to media reports, date back to interactions with a female junior officer in 2010.

"As announced by the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service (CFNIS) is investigating the allegations of inappropriate behavior. PCO was informed prior to the announcement," Fenelon said.

The PCO is responsible for referring all matters of national interest to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), however, Fenelon said that the PCO could not further comment on the issue and did not specify when the agency was first made aware of the allegations or when, or if, the information was shared with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Trudeau's office referred Sputnik to Sajjan's earlier statement. Speaking to reporters on Friday, Trudeau refused to comment on the allegations only saying that every Government of Canada employee has the right to work in a safe and healthy environment.

Asked about the timeline of events and the nature of the allegations, the Department of National Defense (DND) did not respond to Sputnik's request for comment.

The complaint against McDonald is the second set of misconduct allegations leveled at current or former top Canadian military officials after Global News reported that former Chief of Defense Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance is being accused of misconduct by two female subordinates, including during his time as the country's commanding officer.

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US Intelligence Report Assesses Saudi Crown Prince Approved Operation to Kill Khashoggi

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence published a declassified report on Friday saying that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman approved an operation to assassinate Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, Turkey.

"We assess that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman approved an operation in Istanbul, Turkey, to capture or kill Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi," the report said. "The Crown Prince viewed Khashoggi as a threat to the Kingdom and broadly supported using violent measures if necessary to silence him."

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US Operation in Syria Used Precision-Guided Munitions on 11 Terror Facilities - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The US military operation in Syria utilized two F-15 fighter jets to drop seven precision-guided munitions to fully or partially destroy 11 facilities used by Iranian-backed militias in Syria, Defense Department spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Friday.

"Two F-15E 'Strike Eagles' dropped seven precision-guided munitions totally destroying nine facilities and partially destroying two facilities, making them functionally destroyed," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby explained the structures were located at Abu Kamal terrorist-entry control point located near the Syria-Iraq border on the Syrian site.

"This location is known to facilitate Iranian-allied militia group activity," he said.

The Defense Department has preliminary information about casualties but will not be able to discuss it until a battle damage assessment is completed.

According to Kirby, the US military decided to disclose some details since they have realized the significance of the operation as the first of its kind under the new Biden administration.

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US Informed Russia Via Deconfliction Channel About Thursday Airstrike in Syria - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The United States informed Russia through the deconfliction channel about Thursday's airstrike in eastern Syria that targeted Iran-backed militia groups, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said in an interview on Friday.

"We did inform the Russians through the deconfliction channel that are in place as you would expect we would," Kirby told MSNBC. "We take those obligations of ours seriously and they were informed prior to."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in earlier remarks said the United States informed the Russian military five minutes in advance about Thursday's airstrike against militia groups in eastern Syria.

The top Russian diplomat added that the US presence in Syria is illegal and violates all norms of international law.

Late on Thursday, the US Defense Department said that the US had targeted the infrastructure used by Iranian-backed militias – including Kait'ib Hezbollah and Kait'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada – in eastern Syria. Washington added that the strike was conducted in retaliation for the February 15 rocket attack on the Erbil Air Base in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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Russia Calls for Mideast Quartet Meeting With Regional Actors, Saudi Arabia - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia on Friday proposed to convene in the upcoming spring or summer a high-level meeting with the envoys from the Middle East Quartet, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Israel, Palestine and, possibly, Saudi Arabia.

"We believe that in the spring or summer of this year, it would be useful to hold a ministerial meeting in the four-plus-four-plus-two-format - the Quartet [EU, Russia, the US and the UN], plus Egypt, Jordan, the UAE and Bahrain, plus the Palestinians and Israelis, with the possible inclusion of Saudi Arabia as well," Nebenzia told the UN Security Council.

Nebenzia said that such a meeting would provide an opportunity to assess the current situation and identify key areas of joint work to overcome the current stalemate in the peace process.

"One thing that needs to be done is intensifying the work of the quartet of international mediators and making its meetings regular in nature," he stated.

Nebenzia also noted that during the recent virtual Quartet engagement on February 15, the participants showed readiness to constructively cooperate on advancing the peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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UN Chief Closely Following Reports of US Strikes in Syria, Urges Restraint - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is closely following the reports of US airstrikes in eastern Syria and urges all sides to show restraint and avoid escalation, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday. "The Secretary-General is following closely the reports of a US airstrike targeting sites in eastern Syria in response to recent attacks against the US and Coalition personnel in Iraq," Dujarric said. "He remains concerned about the volatile situation in the region and calls on all concerned sides to exercise restraint and avoid escalation."

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US Informed Russia Via Deconfliction Channel About Thursday Airstrike in Syria - Pentagon

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Almost Half of Americans Over 65 Received First Dose of Coronavirus Vaccine - White House

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The White House announced on Friday that about a half of Americans over the age of 65 in the United States have received at list the first dose of the coronavirus vaccine.

"Nearly half of Americans over 65 have received a first shot," White House Senior Advisor for COVID-19 Response Andy Slavitt told reporters during a press briefing.

Slavitt noted that the Biden administration has opened over 400 new vaccination centers in almost 40 US states.

"Any progress is a result of hard work of many people and entities," Slavitt said, noting the importance of public-private sector cooperation in the efforts to vaccinate the population. Asked to comment on some US states' efforts to lift the strict restrictions imposed under the coronavirus pandemic, Slavitt warned against such moves being undertaken too fast.

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UN Rights Experts Urge Biden Administration to End Police Brutality, Systemic Racism in US

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - The administration of US President Joe Biden should enact reforms to put an end to police violence and address systemic racism, United Nations experts from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a statement on Friday.

"In this time of political change, the United States must initiate far-reaching reforms to address police brutality and systemic racism," the statement said. "We hope that the new US administration will be able to pursue the necessary reforms."

The experts called on the US government to close all criminal investigations against peaceful protesters who took part in demonstrations in the wake of the killing of the African-American man George Floyd by a white police officer.

They also expressed concern about the legal frameworks in the United States allowing police to use lethal force whenever deemed "reasonable."

"The various laws and policies governing police use of force must be based on the principles of precaution, necessity and proportionality," the experts said.

Similarly, the experts called for a reform of laws guiding the use of non-lethal weapons as they can and have killed and severely wounded individuals, leading to permanent disability.

The United States should to address the issue concerning the increased militarization of policing, noting that officers are more prone to violent behavior when they use military equipment.

The UN experts further recommended addressing non-serious offenses, such as minor traffic violations, through tools outside of the criminal justice system.

Simultaneously, the US authorities should reinvest funds from policing budgets toward social and economic resources vital for African American communities disproportionately targeted by policing.

"Communities most directly harmed by the existing institutions of policing must have meaningful opportunities to shape policing and related reforms," the experts said.

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Canadian Health Official Says Review of Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 Vaccine Almost Complete

TORONTO, February 26 (Sputnik) - Review of the coronavirus vaccine produced by Johnson & Johnson subsidiary, Janssen Pharmaceuticals, is nearly complete, Health Canada Chief Medical Advisor Supriya Sharma said on Friday.

"With respect to Janssen, specifically, that review is progressing very well. We're expecting to get some additional information on manufacturing today; but other than that, that file is pretty much complete," Sharma told reporters in Ottawa.

Sharma said a regulatory decision on the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, as well as the Novavax candidate, would come down in line with other global health regulators.

However, she dismissed assumptions that authorization for the vaccine would be granted in the coming days if such action is taken by US authorities.

Reports in the United States suggest that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine could be approved there as early as this weekend.

Sharma also provided an update on the regulatory approval process of the Novavax vaccine candidate, saying that Health Canada expects the producer to submit a significant amount of data before the end of April, a month ahead of schedule.

Regulators have currently approved four vaccines for use in Canada, including the AstraZeneca vaccine and its Serum Institute of India version, which was authorized earlier on Friday.

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World Must Unite, Speak as One Voice to Support People of Myanmar - US Envoy to UN

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The world must unite and speak with one voice to support the people of Myanmar against the brutal crackdown against them by the country's military following the February 1 coup, newly appointed US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Friday.

"We ask that the whole world speaks with one voice," Thomas-Greenfield said in her first statement to the General Assembly since her appointment. "The people of Myanmar are making their voices heard. They are demanding their democracy back. We stand in solidarity with them. ...The world is watching. We hear them and we stand with them."

It was time for the Myanmar military to immediately relinquish power and restore the country's democratically elected government, Thomas-Greenfield said.

"We condemn the security forces [for the] killing of unarmed people. ...We must all condemn attacks on journalists, activists and peaceful protestors," she added.

Thomas-Greenfield is a veteran State Department diplomat coordinated US policies on combating the Ebola epidemic during the Obama administration. She has pledged to emphasize diplomacy and restore multilateral cooperation to US policy at the United Nations.

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International Community Must Not Recognize Myanmar Military Takeover - UN Special Envoy

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The international community must not recognize or grant any legitimacy to the military rulers who seized power in Myanmar, toppling the democratically elected government there in a coup on February 1, UN Special Envoy Christine Schraner Burgener said on Friday.

"It is important that the international community does not lend recognition or legitimacy to this regime," Burgener told a special meeting of the UN General Assembly.

The UN Special Envoy explained there is no justification for the Myanmar military's actions and there can be "no business as usual under the current circumstances."

Burgener called on the UN General Assembly to send "a strong signal" in support of the restoration of democracy in Myanmar.

"I am ringing the alarm bells. I strongly condemn the recent steps taken by the military and urge all of you to send a strong signal in favor of democratic processes in Myanmar. ... There can be no business as usual under the current circumstances," she said.

Some 700 individuals had already been detained mainly arbitrarily and without charges in Myanmar and the country's humanitarian needs remained acute with more than 1 million people in need, Burgener added.

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UN Mideast Envoy Says Palestinian Factions, Voters Make Progress Toward Holding Election

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland told the UN Security Council on Friday about the progress that has been made by Palestinian factions and voters ahead of the 2021 general election.

"Palestinian factions are making progress towards holding legislative, presidential and Palestinian National Council elections," Wennesland said.

"Meanwhile, the Palestinian public is doing its part. On February 17, the Central Elections Commission closed voter registration and announced 421,000 new registrants during the period, raising the total registered voters to over 2.6 million, 93 percent of all eligible voters," he said.

Wennesland pointed out that it is encouraging to see that nearly 80 percent of 1.56 million voters, who will be voting for the first time, are under 30 years old.

The Special Coordinator also reiterated the commitment of the United Nations to support and facilitate the preparation toward the first general election in 15 years.

Legislative elections are slated for May 22, followed by a presidential race two months later and the Palestinian National Council elections planned for August 31.

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Recently Deployed US B-1B Bombers to Norway Conduct First Mission - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - US B-1B Lancer bombers that were recently deployed to Norway have conducted their first mission from that country, the Defense Department said in a statement on Friday.

"Two B-1s conducted tactical integration with Norwegian F-35s and Norwegian naval assets in the eastern Barents Sea," the statement said.

The bomber task force missions demonstrate the United States' commitment to the collective defense of NATO and contribute to the stability in the European theater, the statement added.

"This type of interoperability is especially critical in the Arctic where no one nation has the infrastructure or capacity to operate alone," US Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa commander Jeff Harrigian said in the statement.

The US bombers arrived in Norway earlier this week and their crews joined the 200 US airmen that were deployed there earlier in February.

Russia criticized the deployments to its neighbor Norway as a sign of military buildup in the region.

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UN Special Envoy Says Middle East Quartet Agrees to Meet on 'Regular Basis'

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - Special envoys of the Middle East Quartet, who met on February 15 to discuss Israeli-Palestinian settlement, agreed to continue their engagement regularly, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tom Wennesland told the UN Security Council on Friday.

"On February 15, the Envoys of the Middle East Quartet, from Russia, the United States, the European Union and the United Nations, met virtually to discuss the latest political developments and the situation on the ground. All agreed to meet on a regular basis to continue their engagement," Wennesland said.

On a separate note, Wennesland pointed out that "significant development" in coming weeks and months will influence the prospects for advancing peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The Middle East Quartet is a group created with the participation of the the United States, Russia, the European Union and United Nations to consolidate efforts for a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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World Must Not Recognize, Acknowledge Military Takeover in Myanmar - UN Special Envoy

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The international community must not recognize or grant any legitimacy to the military rulers who seized power in Myanmar, toppling the

democratically elected government there in a coup on February 1, United Nations Special Envoy Christine Schraner Burgener told the UN General Assembly on Friday.

"It is important that the international community does not lend recognition or legitimacy to this regime," Burgener, who was appointed by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, told a special meeting of the General Assembly.

"There is no justification for the military's actions. There can be no business as usual under the current circumstances."

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Health Canada Approves AstraZeneca Coronavirus Vaccine - Statement

TORONTO, February 26 (Sputnik) - Canada's health regulatory agency announced on Friday that it has approved the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine along with the Serum Institute of India's version of the vaccine.

"Today, Health Canada authorized two vaccines; the COVID-19 vaccine manufactured by AstraZeneca, and developed in partnership with Oxford University, and, the Serum Institute of India's version of the AstraZeneca vaccine," the regulators said in a statement.

The AstraZeneca vaccine and its Serum Institute version are the third and fourth vaccines to be approved by Health Canada and the first viral vector vaccines; the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines - both based on mRNA experimental technology - were authorized in mid-December.

Health Canada added that the vaccines meet the country's safety, efficacy and quality requirements, but placed numerous terms and conditions on the vaccine by requiring that manufacturers to continue to provide rolling data.

The vaccine is authorized for use in individuals over the age of 18 and can be stored in temperatures between 2 and 8 degrees Celsius for at least six months, the statement said. Canada currently ranks 59th in the world for total vaccine doses administered per 100 people, according to Our World in Data.

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US Personal Income Increased 10% in January, Consumer Spending Up 2.4% - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - US personal income grew by 10 percent in January while consumer spending increased 2.4 percent during the same month, the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis said in a statement on Friday.

"Personal income increased \$1,954.7 billion (10.0 percent) in January," the statement said.

"Personal consumption expenditures increased \$340.9 billion (2.4 percent)."

Both numbers are key indicators of the economy's health, especially consumer spending, which accounts for 70 percent of GDP.

On Thursday, the Commerce Department said GDP growth for the fourth quarter of 2020 showed a slightly higher reading of 4.1 percent on its second reading. The first reading, conducted on January 28, showed a growth of 4 percent.

Americans' disposal income and spending improved in January after personal checks for \$600 were sent out to most individuals by the former Trump administration under a \$900 billion COVID-19 relief package approved by Congress.

Aside from those checks, people rendered jobless by the novel coronavirus pandemic also received their regular \$300-a-week compensation from the government in January. The Commerce Department said the additional money helped boost the overall spending of Americans.

"The estimate for January personal income and outlays was impacted by the continued federal response to the spread of COVID-19," the statement released on Friday said.

Americans who managed to hold on to their jobs and income through the pandemic, especially those in higher-earning households, have also been spending more on consumer goods and services after enduring strict coronavirus-related restrictions on travel, outdoor dining and other activities.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April at the height of economic lockdowns and other restrictive coronavirus-related measures. Since, almost every month except in December, the United States has experienced jobs growth, including in January when 49,000 jobs were created. Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said recently the real unemployment rate remained closer to 10 percent as compared to the low of 3.5 percent in February 2020 before the onset of the pandemic.

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UN Rights Experts Warn Myanmar Military of Accountability for Int'l Crimes in Protests

UNITED NATIONS, February 26 (Sputnik) - UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) experts on Friday warned the Myanmar military of international accountability for violent crimes committed against peaceful demonstrators and journalists in the anti-coup protests.

"We warn the military junta that those who are responsible for repression and killing of peaceful protesters, as well as the detention of government officials and journalists, will be held accountable before international jurisdictions," the experts said in a statement.

According to the OHCHR, at least five protesters have died, and 700 people including State counselor Suu Kyi and President Win Myint have been detained since the February 1 Myanmar's military seizure of power.

Massive demonstrations, triggered by the coup, have seen a number of journalists being arbitrarily detained and subjected to deliberate attacks by military forces, the UN rights office said.

"Deliberate attacks on journalists and their arbitrary detention are serious violations of international human rights law and must immediately stop," the experts said.

They also noted that the "unlawful" cybersecurity bill, already passed or planned to be passed, which will give the military access to user information, would violate Myanmar peoples' right to privacy.

The experts also reiterated their call on the military to immediately end the use of force against peaceful protesters and restore democratic institutions in the country.

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US Navy Battling Covid-19 Outbreaks on 2 Warships in Middle East - Central Command

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has isolated and is treating outbreaks of COVID-19 on two warships in the Middle East operating out of 5th Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) announced on Friday.

"US 5th Fleet took immediate actions to identify, isolate, test and treat affected Sailors and Marines aboard two ships," NAVCENT said in a statement.

Currently, around 12 service members aboard the amphibious transport dock USS San Diego have tested positive for COVID-19 and the guided-missile cruiser USS Philippine also has identified several individuals who are now persons under investigation, the statement said.

"San Diego is currently pierside in the Kingdom of Bahrain. All positive cases have been isolated on board, and the ship remains in a restricted COVID bubble. The port visit and medical support have been coordinated with the host nation government and Bahrain Ministry of Health," NAVCENT said.

The Philippine Sea is expected to pull into port to conduct further testing of all who have possibly been exposed however the port location will not be disclosed, in advance, due to operational security, the statement said.

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Russian Mayoral Candidate Sees Road Repair, Affordable Housing as Top Priorities

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The first Russian candidate for New York Mayor Vitaly Filipchenko told Sputnik his top campaign priorities include fixing roads and building affordable housing.

Filipchenko, who grew up in the city of Tomsk in Siberia, moved to the US a decade ago. He has met the requirement of being a US citizen for seven years and now must collect 3,750 signatures by May 25 to officially get on the ballot for the city's mayoral race.

"I'll tell you honestly New York is no different from Russia - fools and roads," Filipchenko said.

Filipchenko, who owns a moving service company and is educated in the field of road construction and maintenance, explained that an example of such improper use of the budget is asphalt laying. He said he is constantly seeing problems with the city's roads.

"Life expectancy of asphalt roads is about 15 years," he said. "In New York, I noticed, they simply lay it again after 2-3 years. This is basically a theft from the city's budget funds. It is in some corporations' interest. Why does the city spend that much money? "

Roads are one of the most expensive items and biggest expenses as lots of materials are used and much labor is required.

"If we look at other states, warm Florida, Georgia, their state budgets are not even 10 times but 20, 50 times smaller than New York's. And their roads are better. Here in New York, let's just be honest, there is a bawdy attitude towards the roads," he said.

At the same time, Filipchenko believes, New York can benefit from historical experience. Nearly a century ago, government contracts for road construction helped lift America out of the Great Depression.

"Repairing roads, building roads like in 1937, when there was a depression in America. We must start the program, increase it. Let's say city and state. And the state should create more jobs," Filipchenko explained.

Filipchenko sees his second task, if elected, as developing urban construction in a way that maximizes profit for the city and the poor rather than private firms.

"Now in New York, mainly private corporations are engaged in housing construction, they build skyscrapers and then resell them. Why does the city itself not want to build houses and make a profit to the budget? This is a profitable business," he stressed.

By increasing the state's share in construction, Filipchenko believes, the city will be able to fill its budget.

The mayoral candidate also plans to change the system of admission to New York public schools. Now the city has the so-called zoning. To enter elementary or middle school, a child must live in a school's area. And this, according to Filipchenko, leads to inequality.

"It turns out like this: rich people rent an apartment. According to the documents, they live in this area and their children just get to this school, while the children from other districts, where there is no school, they have no opportunity to get in," he said. "I want to remove this system.

Everyone should have equal conditions."

In Russia, Filipchenko graduated from university and owned a small business - a summer cafe. Filipchenko came to the US on a tourist visa. When it was about to expire, he was looking for ways to officially extend it when by a happy coincidence, he met an American woman at his friend's wedding, and the two fell in love with each other. Filipchenko and his wife have now been happily married for 12 years.

The general election is scheduled for November 2.

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Russian Mayoral Candidate Supports Development of New York's Ties With Native Home

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The very first Russian candidate for New York Mayor Vitaly Filipchenko in an interview with Sputnik expressed willingness to develop ties between New York and cities in his native country.

"I am definitely for it. If anything is done with good will and with the peace prospect, I am all for it," Filipchenko said. "Why should we divide people? We must bring people together."

Filipchenko, who grew up in the city of Tomsk in Siberia, moved to the US a decade ago and is preparing to enter the city's mayoral race as an independent. The general election is scheduled for November 2.

Filipchenko said one area of possible US-Russian cooperation is employment amid the increasing automation.

"As great businessmen say, in the future machines and robots will be doing most of the work. We need to solve the problem not at the country level, but at the global level, because we need to decide what people will do," he said. "The population is increasing, and automation goes faster and faster. We must already begin to consider that problem now at the level including at the level of sister cities."

Moreover, the mayoral candidate noted, twin cities could contribute to solving environmental problems.

Filipchenko came to the United States on a tourist visa. When it was about to expire, he was looking for ways to officially extend it but by a happy coincidence, he met an American woman at his friend's wedding, and the two fell in love with each other. Filipchenko and his wife have now been happily married for 12 years.

Filipchenko owns a small business - a moving services company in New York. He has been actively involved in the community life: has been attending community meetings and also volunteered for the Auxiliary New York Police Department.

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Russian Mayoral Candidate Considers New York's Fight Against Pandemic Ineffective

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The very first Russian candidate for New York Mayor, Vitaly Filipchenko, in an interview with Sputnik criticized city and state authorities for their ineffective fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

Filipchenko, who grew up in the city of Tomsk in Siberia, moved to the US a decade ago. He has met the requirement of being a US citizen for seven years and now must collect 3,750 signatures by May 25 to officially get on the ballot for the city's mayoral race.

"There were no prevention measures such as street cleaning or subway disinfection," Filipchenko said. "There was also incomplete information about the pandemic."

The unpreparedness of the authorities, an incorrect assessment of the pandemic has led to an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, he continued.

The candidate also pointed to the recent scandal involving New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who has been accused of deliberately underreporting the number of deaths in nursing homes. 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. Cuomo, a Democrat, has continued to reject the allegations.

"He [Cuomo] kept silent about this situation but in the end it came to light. People died because of that," Filipchenko said.

According to Filipchenko, the authorities of the city and the state of New York were completely ineffective in spending the funds allocated to fight the pandemic and could have helped people more during the crisis.

Filipchenko also criticized mayor for practically destroying all small business, such as restaurants in New York due to ineffective pandemic policies.

The US by far leads the world in both confirmed COVID-19 cases (28.4 million) and deaths (508,000). New York City was a COVID-19 hot spot early on in the crisis and has to date recorded more than 602,000 cases and over 29,000 deaths.

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Russian Mayoral Candidate Wants to Help New York Use Budget Wisely

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The very first Russian candidate for New York Mayor, Vitaly Filipchenko, told Sputnik he is running for office to stop wasteful spending and help the city utilize its budget more wisely.

Filipchenko, who is running as an independent, grew up in the city of Tomsk in Siberia. He graduated from university and even owned a summer cafe in Russia, before moving to the US a decade ago. He has met the requirement of being a US citizen for seven years and now must collect 3,750 signatures by May 25 to officially get on the ballot.

"I see that the New York budget is being used very incompetently and irrationally... Either you have to be just a complete fool as a mayor or there is a corruption motivation involved," Filipchenko said. "I think someone should be first, someone should stand up and say, 'Sorry, guys, this is a disgrace.'"

Filipchenko noted that he has had his business for 12 years and got tired of seeing constant misuse of funds. A direct approach would help the city if he is elected mayor and particularly with respect to the budget, he added.

"I was born before perestroika in a working family that was not rich. The budget was limited," he said. "We have experience, we know how to save money. So, my background and experience will first of all help in spending funds properly. Immigrants know how to save money and how to properly distribute the budget."

The mayoral candidate said he seeks to break a stereotype that immigrants come to the United States to earn, purchase a home, then a second home and lay low.

"I think that I am the first to kind of dare to join such a struggle, let's say the first, but not the last. There is an opportunity. In New York and in America it is real. That is, I am already, as they say, fighting for my place under the sun. Many expats who think it is unrealistic, will now be convinced otherwise," he said.

Filipchenko is sure that it is his immigrant past that will help him in solving urban problems.

"Most people make promises, even though they don't know these problems," he noted. "How do you promise to help people if you don't live with these problems, you are somewhere above these problems? And I am exactly among the people. I live in these real problems. I know the difficulties, I know the nuances, so I am closer to the people. It plays a big role."

Filipchenko went on to say that his opponents in the mayoral race are close to the small percentage of people who have not been affected by the current economic crisis, have high salaries and good connections.

"I do not defend the interests of the rich and the people who are now running are closer to the high class. They promise to help people although they are unaware of the people's problems," he said.

Filipchenko shared that his main electorate is immigrants.

"These people can decide the real outcome. Why? Because half of New York are immigrants - even people who were born here and who are Americans, but their parents are immigrants, as well as their parents no matter where they came from France, from Germany, Italy - these people are ready to support me," he said. "Why? Because I am an immigrant, I have come all this difficult way. They trust me more than all the officials who simply promise for four years and disappear in four years. They see me as one of them."

The general election is scheduled for November 2.

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Biden Says US Will Never Recognize Crimea's Reunification With Russia

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Friday that Washington would never recognize Crimea's decision to rejoin Russia.

"The United States does not and will never recognize Russia's purported annexation of the peninsula, and we will stand with Ukraine against Russia's aggressive acts," Biden said in a statement.

He promised to continue working to hold Russia accountable for alleged abuses and aggression in Ukraine.

Biden accused Moscow of violating international law and the territorial integrity of Ukraine. He also assured Kiev of continued US support.

Crimea, a Russian enclave, was transferred to Ukraine in 1954 by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. An overwhelming majority of people in Crimea voted in March 2014 to secede from Ukraine and rejoin Russia in a referendum that Kiev, the US and its Western allies rejected as illegal.