

**03/01/2021 Monday**

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GOP Claims White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain is 'Running the Show' Instead of Biden by [Mary F.](#)

Ron Klain is an American attorney and former lobbyist who is currently serving as the White House Chief of Staff under US President Joe Biden. From 2009 to 2011, Klain served as Biden's Chief of Staff when he was vice president. He had also previously served as Chief of Staff to Vice President Al Gore, from 1995 to 1999.

In recent days, Republicans attacked White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain, referring to him as the "guy behind the curtain" and "Prime Minister Klain" as they blame Klain for President Joe Biden's refusal to negotiate the price on his \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package.

Under the relief package, millions of Americans would receive \$1,400 stimulus payments, and unemployment aid would be extended throughout the summer. The bill also provides aid to small businesses and allocates \$74 million for COVID-19 vaccinations and treatments.

"We've gotten the impression from our members that have been in meetings down there that he's [Klain] kind of the guy behind the curtain," Senate Republican Whip John Thune is quoted as saying, [The Hill reported.](#)

Aides to Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell have also referred to the White House Chief of Staff as "Prime Minister Klain," with an unidentified Republican aide telling The Hill that Klain's actions are contributing to the perception that Biden is not "running the show."

"It plays into the theme of Biden's not really running the show here," the aide explained.

Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), who met with Biden at the White House earlier this month along with a group of 10 fellow Republican senators, told the outlet that Biden is being closed in by Klain and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.

"The problem is that what appear to be productive talks seem to be countermanded by the Democratic leader in the Senate," Collins explained to reporters, also adding that Klain attempted to undermine any progress Biden and GOP senators might have made during their February 1 meeting.

"Ron was shaking his head in the back of the room, the whole time, which is not exactly an encouraging sign," she said.

On Thursday, McConnell noted that the COVID-19 relief package is a progressive legislation that suggests the president is being forced to move to the left.

"The president has chosen a very progressive beginning. His chief of staff, on MSNBC yesterday, said with regard to the COVID package, the most progressive legislation in a generation," the GOP leader said. "The president has decided not to be a centrist."

However, one White House ally has a different take.

"This is the political equivalent of frightfully screaming, 'the dog ate my homework,'" a White House ally told The Hill. "The reality is they've made a major unforced error in opposing a

rescue plan that the president repeatedly invited them to be a part of and that the majority of both economists and Republican voters themselves support."

Another unidentified adviser also suggested that Biden, not Klain, is in control.

"God loves Ron Klain, but Joe Biden does what Joe Biden wants to do," one adviser said. "He certainly takes the advice and processes it. Ron is one of the best advisers the president has, but he knows what he has to do."

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'A Terrific Day:' Israel Welcomes First-Ever UAE Ambassador  
by [Mary F.](#)

The UAE and Israel signed a normalization agreement on August 13, 2020, officially referred to as the Abraham Accords. As a result, the UAE became the third Arab country after Egypt in 1997 and Jordan in 1994 to formally formalize its relationship with Israel.

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin on Monday received the first-ever ambassador to Israel from the UAE, following the agreement between the countries last year to normalize relations, [The Times of Israel reported](#).

According to the outlet, UAE envoy Mohamed Mahmoud Al Khajah arrived in Israel on Monday, and delivered his credentials to Rivlin during a ceremony in Jerusalem.

"This is a moving ceremony for me, as president of Israel," Rivlin said during the ceremony.

"We believed that if we waited patiently, the right time would come in which we would be able to take our ties a step forward. To deepen the friendship between us. To make it public," Rivlin noted, adding that relations between Israel and the UAE have been developing for some time.

"Our countries have a shared ethos: a small country committed to turning arid land into a flourishing garden, against all the odds," Rivlin continued, also calling Monday's ceremony "a terrific day, in which the Emirati flag flies alongside the Israeli flag over the President's Residence in Jerusalem."

"Our two countries have the largest and most important economies in the region," Al Khajah said. "I will make every effort to make these relations ever tighten, to close the gap between the two countries and their people," he continued, noting that Israel and the UAE have "collaborated in fighting COVID-19," he added.

Al Khajah will spend a few days in Israel, where he is expected to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as other senior officials.

Earlier Monday, Al Khajah met with Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, who wished the new envoy success in his "historic mission."

This is not the first instance of improved relations between Israel and the UAE.

In December 2020, the UAE Football Association signed a memorandum of understanding with the Israeli Football Association in Dubai to establish closer sporting ties. Diaa Saba also became the first Israeli in September 2020 to play in the UAE after joining Al-Nasr, the professional association football club located in Al Nasr, Dubai.

The UAE is not the only Arab country to normalize diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. Relations between Bahrain and Israel were also normalized in September 2020. In December 2020, Morocco also normalized ties with Israel, while Sudan normalized relations with the Jewish state on October 23, 2020.

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New York AG Receives Referral to Launch Probe Into Sexual Harassment Allegations Against Cuomo

by [Mary F.](#)

In recent weeks, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has been accused of sexual harassment by two former aides. On Sunday, Cuomo issued a public apology, apologizing for any past offensive behavior but denying that he ever inappropriately touched anyone.

On Monday, New York Attorney General Letitia James revealed that she has received a referral letter to launch an investigation into the sexual assault made against Cuomo. The letter, sent to James' office by Beth Garvey, a special counsel and senior adviser to Cuomo, requests that James conduct an independent inquiry into "allegations of and circumstances surrounding sexual harassment claims made against the Governor."

"This is not a responsibility we take lightly as allegations of sexual harassment should always be taken seriously," James also added in a statement to [The Hill](#), referring to the independent investigation.

The allegations against Cuomo have been met with widespread criticism.

One former aide, [Lindsey Boyland](#), accused Cuomo of kissing her without consent, and revealed that the New York governor allegedly suggested that they play strip poker. Another former aide, Charlotte Bennett, [accused](#) the governor of making unwanted advances toward her last spring.

In a statement issued Sunday, Cuomo stated that his actions in the workplace "may have been insensitive or too personal," but that he "never inappropriately touched anybody."

"I now understand that my interactions may have been insensitive or too personal and that some of my comments, given my position, made others feel in ways I never intended," the governor added. "I acknowledge some of the things I have said have been misinterpreted as an unwanted flirtation. To the extent anyone felt that way, I am truly sorry about that."

Cuomo has been under fire in recent weeks after reports surfaced that he deliberately concealed the real number of COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes from the federal government.

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Videos: Huge Demonstrations Rock Haiti as Opposition to Moïse's Claimed Extended Term Grows

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In the aftermath of Haiti's catastrophic 2010 earthquake, the US helped the right-wing Tet Kale Party take and retain power, including backing the controversial delays in the 2015 election at the heart of the present crisis.

Huge protests swept across Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince over the weekend, as well as a number of other provincial towns, as Haitians took to the streets by the tens of thousands to demand President Jovenel Moïse step down.

They carried signs and sung songs and chants demanding an end to his power grab last month, as well as to the violence of gangs allied with his government, which have terrorized communities with kidnappings and killings.

The protesters hold that Moïse's last day in office should have been February 7. However, he claims that a year's delay in him taking office means he now gets an extra year as head of state. Those who oppose his claims have been subjected to increasing violence and repression. People were particularly enraged by the killing of 63-year-old pediatrician Ernst Pady, who was shot by gangsters during an attempted abduction on Sunday morning.

"We have a president that we no longer recognise because his term is over," protester Moïse Gueslin told [Agence France-Presse](#). "Look at how a doctor was killed: is it possible to live in a country like this?"

Meanwhile, others demanded an "economic revolution" undoing the carefully manicured dependency of Haiti on the United States, including one person who came astride a mule and dressed up as Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the former slave-turned-general who led the successful slave revolution in 1804 that ousted the French colonists and established Haiti as the first Black republic in the western hemisphere. [Dessalines' name has been](#) constantly invoked amid the demonstrations against Moïse, who is seen as symbolizing the ostracism and victimization imposed on Haiti by colonial powers ever since its independence.

By some estimates, 100,000 people marched in Port-au-Prince alone; at the huge rallies, they taunted Helen la Lime, the UN Special Representative in Haiti, a former US diplomat and figure they see as helping orchestrate the present crisis, for chronically underestimating the size of the anti-Moïse demonstrations in her reports.

From 2004 until 2017, the UN maintained thousands of peacekeeping troops in the country, many of which were found complicit in everything from [widespread sexual abuse](#) of Haitian citizens to having caused the nation's [first Cholera outbreak](#).

Protests Outside DC Embassy

On Monday, protesters in Washington, DC, demonstrated outside the Haitian Embassy in solidarity with the struggle in Haiti, and to demand the Biden administration end its support for Moïse.

"With the election of US president Joe Biden, folks believed this so-called 'champion' of fair elections and the rule of law - who had expressed a commitment that 'Black Lives Matter' - would rally to the side of Haitians and end US support for the dictatorship," the Black Alliance for Peace, which called the protest, [said in a statement](#). "But that did not happen."

"It did not matter that Moïse ruled by decree, that he violated the rights of his people and that the majority of the people wanted him gone. What mattered to the Biden administration was the purpose Moïse served in US plans for the Caribbean and Latin American region," they added.

“The values that the United States and Western Europeans pretend to uphold - like democracy and human rights - are dead letters when it comes to the fundamental human rights of the peoples of the global South.”

They also called attention to the wider struggle of Black people around the globe, calling for [US Africa Command](#) to leave the African continent as well as expressing solidarity with [Black workers in Alabama](#) who are presently engaged in a fierce struggle to become the first-ever unionized Amazon workers.

'Worse Than the Duvaliers'

[As Sputnik reported](#) at the time, the Haitian Superior Judiciary Council ruled Moïse's term was over on February 7, his five-year term having expired. There having been no elections for a replacement head of state, the opposition presented Supreme Court judge Mecene Jean-Louis as the interim president until new presidential and parliamentary elections could be organized. In response, Moïse had Jean-Louis and nearly two dozen others arrested and claimed to have [foiled a coup d'etat](#).

During the 2015 Haitian presidential elections, Tet Kale Party candidate Moïse handily won the first round, but after widespread voter fraud a runoff election was held after much delay, which Moïse also won; as a result, he took office on February 7, 2017, instead of February 7, 2016. [According to Al Jazeera](#), the Haitian constitution mandates a 5-year term for the president beginning on February 7, but also says that if the election is delayed, the president immediately takes office but his mandate is considered to have begun “on February 7 in the year of the election.”

Now, he has proposed changes to the 1987 Haitian Constitution, which dates to the re-establishment of democracy following the ouster of longtime dictator Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier the year prior. The changes would further enhance the power of the presidency, including by removing the office of the prime minister, a figure who at present can only be dismissed by the National Assembly.

Pierre Esperance, coordinator of the Haitian human-rights group National Network in Defence of Human Rights (RNDDH), told Al Jazeera that Moïse's government “is worse than those of the Duvaliers,” who ruled with an iron fist from 1957 to 1986. “The United States, Canada, the UN and the European Union are endorsing the excesses of power. The people have the last word to thwart this dictatorship.”

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Photos: Military Projectile Reportedly Falls in Saudi Arabia's Jazan, Injuring Five People  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Biden administration has recently said it would continue to approve weapons sales to Saudi Arabia on a case-by-case basis, despite Washington's official opposition to the Saudi-led war in Yemen.

According to the Saudi Press Agency, early Tuesday morning a Houthi projectile struck the southern city of Jizan, injuring five people; three were Saudi citizens and two were Yemenis.

Photos released by Saudi civil defense show smashed shops and cars in the coastal city, which sits just north of the Saudi-Yemeni border.

It's unclear what type of projectile it was. [Houthi forces have launched](#) both small suicide drones as well as larger ballistic missiles at Saudi cities as well as civil and military installations.

Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia have increased dramatically in recent years as the Saudi-led coalition has proven unable to halt the group's slow advance across Yemen. The war began in 2015 after the Houthis, at the head of a mass movement angry over rising inequality in the impoverished country, forced Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi from power. After Hadi fled to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and a team of allies began a devastating air and sea campaign that has killed more than 100,000 Yemenis. Other nations in the coalition have been the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, and Morocco.

Last week, as Houthi forces closed in on the [key government stronghold](#) of Marib, the Saudi-led alliance, which includes anti-Houthi militia forces in Yemen, rallied their troops to the city. The Houthis have [claimed that Daesh fighters](#) are among the government's reinforcements.

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Ghana, Côte D'Ivoire Become First Nations to Administer COVID-19 Vaccines From WHO's COVAX Program

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Africa as a whole has suffered comparatively less deaths from the novel coronavirus compared to many industrialized nations, for reasons still not entirely clear. However, if global vaccination trends are not reversed, the continent's deaths could continue long after they decline in other places.

Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire launched their COVID-19 vaccination drives on Monday, the first on the planet to use vaccines provided by the World Health Organization's COVAX program.

First in line to get the shots in their respective countries were Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo and Patrick Achi, the secretary-general to Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara, according to [Agence France-Presse](#).

"It is important that I set the example that this vaccine is safe by being the first to have it, so that everybody in Ghana can feel comfortable about taking this vaccine," said 76-year-old Akufo-Addo, who [won a second term](#) in December, during a live broadcast in which he received the shot. He tested positive for COVID-19 in April 2020.

More than half a million Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine doses arrived in both Accra and Abidjan last week, part of a global initiative in partnership with the WHO to provide COVID-19 vaccines to poorer nations at low cost, in order to ensure equitable inoculation against the virus. A number of [nations have contributed](#) to the program, but industrialized nations have at the same time acquired [far more vaccine](#) doses than they need, virtually ensuring the rollout will continue to be unequal.

"We will not end the pandemic anywhere unless we end it everywhere," WHO Director-General Tedros [Adhanom Ghebreyesus said](#) in a press release last week. "Today is a major first step

towards realizing our shared vision of vaccine equity, but it's just the beginning. We still have a lot of work to do with governments and manufacturers to ensure that vaccination of health workers and older people is underway in all countries within the first 100 days of this year." According to AFP, some 145 participating nations will receive 337.2 million doses by the middle of 2021, which will only provide for just over 3% of their combined populations. By that time, the [Biden administration expects](#) to have a dose available for all 330 million Americans. Ghana's Health Ministry has also separately [registered the Sputnik V](#) vaccine, which was developed in Russia and was the world's first. The government hopes to have two-thirds of its 30-million-strong population vaccinated by year's end, although COVAX will cover just 6 million Ghanians, according to AFP. However, [other African nations](#) have already begun vaccination that aren't participating in the COVAX program, including Senegal, [South Africa](#), Zimbabwe, the Seychelles, Mauritius, Rwanda, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt.

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US to Consider Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia on Case-by-Case Basis Through Process Led by NSC  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US President Joe Biden has long attacked the Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen, calling for an end to hostilities. However, after becoming president, Biden has only taken minor measures to affect that war without applying major pressure to Riyadh. A US State Department spokesperson said Monday that Washington would not issue a blanket ban on selling weapons to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The decision comes after the release of an intelligence dossier linking the monarchy to a prominent journalist's assassination and amid the kingdom's ongoing war in Yemen. "The NSC [National Security Council] leads the process to evaluate proposed weapons transfers," State Department spokesperson Edward Price said at a press briefing. "That's the way it should be. They will be evaluated... on a case-by-case basis going forward." "We are aware of a network known as the Rapid Intervention Force, a unit of the Saudi Royal Guard that has engaged in counter-dissident operations, including the operation that resulted in the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi," Price said. "We have urged Saudi Arabia to disband this group and then adopt institutional systemic reforms and controls to ensure that anti-dissident activities and operations cease." Last week, the Biden administration [declassified a dossier](#) from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence that found that Khashoggi's killing in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018, could not have happened without the knowledge and approval of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who "has had absolute control of the kingdom's security and intelligence organizations." However, paradoxically, in the aftermath of the report US President Joe Biden took no action [against the crown prince](#) or the crown. "We believe there is more effective ways to make sure

this doesn't happen again and to also be able to leave room to work with the Saudis on areas where there is mutual agreement, where there is national interests for the US. That is what diplomacy looks like," White House Press Secretary [Jen Psaki said](#) on Sunday.

The announcement also comes after Biden said he was ending US support for Riyadh's offensive operations in Yemen, but not military support for Saudi Arabia overall. In early February, [Biden paused several](#) smart bomb sales to Saudi Arabia in the process of being approved, but left the door open to their future approval, as well as for support for operations that could [be termed "defensive."](#)

In 2020, the Saudi military budget was the [world's ninth-largest](#), spending \$48.5 billion that year, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies think tank. That total is larger than the defense budgets of South Korea, Italy, Canada, Australia, and Brazil, among others.

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US Army Expects to Field New Modular AMPV Armored Vehicle in 2023  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As the Pentagon rushes to outfit its vehicles with as many features as possible, new and unexpected problems are arising, such as a new version of its M1A2 Abrams tank that is too heavy to meet many maximum transport weight limits.

The Pentagon's long-awaited replacement for the M113 family of armored tracked vehicles could be fielded by US forces as early as mid-2023, an Army spokesperson [told Defense News](#) recently.

According to a timeline laid out by the representative from the Army's Program Executive Office for Ground Combat Systems, BAE Systems' Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicle (AMPV) has already begun its basic qualification testing, following its production rollout last September. Some of the problems already encountered have been roof and hatch leaks caused by a mix of newer and older components, requiring those parts to be completely redesigned.

The AMPV aims to fill a large role: the M113s have been in military service since the Vietnam War, but were relegated to secondary duties during the US occupation of Iraq that began in 2003. Their vulnerability to improvised explosive devices and ambushes helped pave the way for the Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected (MRAP) wheeled trucks, although they had their own failings which included inferior offroad performance and weapons loadouts compared to the tracked M113s.

Like the M113, the AMPV is intended to be modular, adapted to a variety of roles ranging from medical support to command post to mortar carrier. Last month, [Lockheed Martin announced](#) it had received a new contract to integrate a Modular Active Protection System (MAPS), which intercepts incoming anti-tank missiles and rocket-propelled grenades at close range, onto the AMPV and other Army vehicles, such as the Stryker light-armored vehicle, the Bradley infantry-fighting vehicle, and the Abrams main battle tank.

However, budget issues created by COVID-19 pandemic-related delays have forced Washington to reconcile some of its grand plans for AMPV procurement. In fiscal year 2021, the

Army is [buying just 32](#) instead of the originally planned buy of 143 this fiscal year. The Army has pledged overall to buy more than 450 AMPVs, but its [plans entail thousands](#) one day being in service.

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'Beautiful Thing': Trump Deems Jan 6 Rally Held Before Capitol Riot a 'Lovefest'  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Moments before the deadly Capitol riot broke out and saw thousands overrun security personnel and ransack the federal building, former US President Donald Trump held a "Stop the Steal" rally in Washington, DC, as congressional lawmakers prepared to certify the result of the 2020 election. The rally has largely been blamed for inciting the siege.

After giving his very first post-presidency speech at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) over the weekend, Trump described the "Stop the Steal" rally he held before the Capitol breach as a delightful event that was filled with nothing but his supporters' goodwill.

In a late Sunday interview with Fox News' Steve Hilton, Trump remarked that the rally was a "beautiful thing," and that it "was a lovefest."

"That rally was massive," the former president noted. "It was tremendous numbers of people." Trump's commentary came after he was asked whether he would have done anything differently since large groups of rally attendees broke away from the event, and relocated to the Capitol steps before engaging in an all-out riot.

The one-time commander-in-chief followed his remarks up by saying he knew the event was going to have a large turnout, saying he told administration officials prior to the January 6 event that 10,000 National Guard troops needed to be "ready."

However, Trump subsequently moved to shift blame over the lack of security enforcement in the nation's capital to "the people at the Capitol," specifically House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). "I heard they rejected [readying the National Guard] because it didn't look good," he told Hilton. According to a [factcheck](#) by The Fresno Bee, Pelosi had no authority over the National Guard decision, which was rejected by the then-House Sergeant at Arms Paul Irving, who did not consult with House leadership.

Trump later switched gears and lamented that he "hates" to see the "terrible" rioting that unfolded at the Capitol, ultimately comparing the events to the fiery racial justice protests that erupted in 2020.

The Capitol riot claimed the lives of several individuals, including three law enforcement officials who responded to the scene. One officer died after having been hit in the head with a large object believed to have been a fire extinguisher, whereas two others died by suicide.

The January 6 events saw thousands of Trump supporters scaling the walls, smashing windows and breaking through several doors, as individuals stormed into the congressional chambers and offices, including one that belonged to Pelosi. The siege itself forced senators and

representatives to remain inside a security bunker on the grounds for several hours, before being cleared to resume the certification process.

While [the rally](#) itself was largely seen as a factor that emboldened Trump loyalists to storm the Capitol, it was Trump's own calls to his supporters that they go to the federal building and "show strength" that officials zeroed in on. In the end, that commentary prompted the US House of Representatives to [impeach him](#) on a sole incitement charge, marking the second-ever impeachment of a sitting president. However, the US Senate [later acquitted](#) Trump. Trump has not given a firm answer to a possible run in the 2024 presidential cycle; however, he [did hint](#) that he may take up the campaign batons once again during his CPAC weekend address.

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Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 Vaccine Likely Available to US Public Within Two Days, Says CEO  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Medical-and-pharmaceutical company Johnson & Johnson recently became the third COVID-19 vaccine candidate to be approved and granted an emergency use authorization by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The injection now joins the ranks of vaccines currently being deployed by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna.

Johnson & Johnson began shipping out its newly approved COVID-19 vaccine on Monday, and intends to ensure that the American public is able to get its hands on its shot within the next two days.

Alex Gorsky, the CEO of Johnson & Johnson, [told](#) NBC's "Today" show during an early morning interview that some 4 million vaccines were "literally on trucks as we're talking."

"We think literally within the next 24 to 48 hours, Americans should start receiving shots in arms," the official remarked before offering details of the company's vaccine distribution plans. "We're committed to doing 100 million by June of this year, and up to a billion by the end of 2021."

The Johnson & Johnson vaccine was [approved](#) by the FDA on Saturday, and has proven to be the easiest of all three approved candidates to store. Unlike the vaccines provided by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, it only requires individuals to take one shot as opposed to two shots.

While its competitors have an efficacy of over 90%, the Johnson & Johnson jab is only 66% effective overall against moderate to severe COVID-19 infections. Studies indicate that its effectiveness appeared to vary depending on one's geographic locations, [Stat News](#) reported. However, the vaccine was also found to have an 85% effectiveness against severe cases. Under clinical trials, officials further determined that individuals who received the Johnson & Johnson shot were not hospitalized and had not died from COVID-19 in the 28 days it took for them to develop an immunity against SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes COVID-19.

Trials for the Johnson & Johnson candidate were carried out between October 2020 and January 2021, a time when several variants of the COVID-19 strain began to emerge and prove much more contagious. Officials have underscored that the new variants are not believed to be deadlier.

“When you look at the numbers around the vaccine, the numbers that are most important is that it works 85 percent of the time against serious disease, and it kept all the patients out of the hospital and from dying - even against these new and really challenging variants,” Gorsky said. The company’s CEO emphasized that Americans need to have a “lot of confidence and trust in knowing they’re getting a very safe and effective, one-shot vaccine.”

Johnson & Johnson is next expected to undertake clinical trials to study the vaccine’s effect on pregnant women and children over the age of 12. The company will also take steps to examine the impact of a possible second dose.

The [latest figures](#) by the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention indicate 96.4 million vaccines have been delivered, but that only 76.8 million doses have actually been administered. Some 25.4 million Americans have been fully vaccinated against the novel coronavirus.

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Israeli High Court Limits Shin Bet’s Controversial Surveillance of COVID-19 Carriers  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In 2020, the Israeli government allowed the nation’s Internal Security Agency (Shin Bet) to use cellphone data to retrace the movements of residents who contracted COVID-19, with the ultimate goal being to inform others who came in contact and ordering them to quarantine. The move was immediately slammed by rights-groups over privacy violations.

The Supreme Court of Israel ruled on Monday that the Shin Bet could no longer have free rein over the cellphone data of its residents, and that it could only tap on its use in cases where an individual refuses to provide details of their contacts.

The ruling states that the cellphone data can only be used as a “complementary tool only” on a case-by-case basis as opposed to its previously understood “sweeping manner.”

“The government justified the severe violation of fundamental rights due to the serious and immediate danger posed to the public by the spread of the [novel] coronavirus, and there was a fear expressed at the beginning that ‘with the passage of time, the temporary may become permanent,’” the judges said in their Monday ruling, [as reported](#) by The Times of Israel.

“We must strive tirelessly and do whatever it takes to stop the need for assistance from the country’s preventive security body in areas not at its core.”

The new changes are scheduled to take effect on March 14.

While rights group hailed the ruling, the same could not be said for Yoav Kisch, who serves as Israel’s deputy health minister. The government official [slammed](#) the development, calling it a “blatant intervention” by the court and a “crime against the health of Israeli citizens.”

He further claimed that the procedures help to save some 500,000 Israelis. It’s unclear how he came to that exact figure.

Israel's controversial methods initially saw the state's Health Ministry send the Shin Bet the name, identification number and contact information of individuals who tested positive for COVID-19.

Once that intelligence was received the agency would then sift through weeks of data to pinpoint what cellphones had been within a 6-foot radius of the ill individual for more than a 15-minute period. Once a list of contacts were established, the Shin Bet would then issue an alert and order them to self-quarantine.

Similar tracking efforts have been used by the security agency to track down wanted Palestinian individuals.

To date, Israel has reported nearly 800,000 COVID-19 cases since the onset of the pandemic; however, hundreds of thousands of those cases saw residents able to recover from the respiratory disease. The Israeli state has a reported death toll of 5,760, according to figures released by [worldometer](#).

However, three lockdowns later, the nation appears to be on the upswing in its fight against the deadly SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes COVID-19. Recent data released by Israeli officials revealed the state has managed to vaccinate more than 84% of its elderly population aged 70 and older.

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'Unprepared': US Needs 'Significant' Changes to Ensure Nation Can Fight New AI Threats, Report Finds

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Under the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence was established in a bid to review advances in AI and related technologies, and to ensure that the US is functioning on all cylinders and can meet new demands.

A report released on Monday by the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (NSCAI) has determined the US is "unprepared" to meet new threats emerging from the tech industry, and that it must implement "significant" changes in order to overcome its current setbacks.

The [NSCAI report](#) is meant to serve as the blueprint for the US' path to staying at the top of the ranks in the AI field.

"The United States must act now to field AI systems and invest substantially more resources in AI innovation to protect its security, promote its prosperity, and safeguard the future of democracy," the commission wrote.

"Today, the government is not organizing or investing to win the technology competition against a committed competitor, nor is it prepared to defend against AI-enabled threats and rapidly adopt AI applications for national security purposes."

"This is not a time for incremental toggles to federal research budgets or adding a few new positions in the Pentagon for Silicon Valley technologists. This will be expensive and require a

significant change in mindset. America needs White House leadership, cabinet-member action and bipartisan congressional support to win the AI era,” it continued.

The report further underscored that with the increased use of artificial intelligence by foreign countries to spread disinformation online and to launch cyberattacks, the Land of the Free will only continue to fall back.

Key recommendations outlined in the commission’s report include ensuring that the American defense sector is “AI-ready” by 2025, creating a Technology Competitiveness Council within the White House that is led by the vice president, and an Emerging Technology Coalition to “promote the use of emerging technologies to strengthen democratic norms and values” with foreign partners.

[US Charges 3 North Korean Hackers in \\$1.3Bln Cyber Scheme, Justice Department Says](#)

Additionally, the multi-pronged boom to achieving AI dominance will include an effort to increase immigration from individuals seeking to either study or work in the AI field and, of course, significantly boosting the funding for annual non-defense federal research and development to \$32 billion by 2026.

“Despite our private-sector and university leadership in AI, the United States remains unprepared for the coming era,” the report states. “Americans must recognize the assertive role that the government will have to play in ensuring the United States wins this innovation competition.”

That competition, according to the commission’s report, is largely being led by China as the country continues to make massive investments in the AI sector. The report notes that China “possesses the might, talent, and ambition to [surpass the United States](#) as the world’s leader in AI in the next decade if current trends do not change.”

“We can either shape the change to come or be swept along by it,” the report adds. “AI is going to reorganize the world. America must lead the charge.”

The Monday-released report culminates two years’ worth of work by Congress-appointed individuals and representatives from tech giants Google, Microsoft, Amazon Web Services and Oracle, among other parties.

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US Green Beret Vet, Son Extradited to Japan for Roles in Ex-Nissan Boss Ghosn's Escape by [Evan Craighead](#)

Michael Taylor and Peter Taylor were arrested at their Massachusetts home in May 2020, months after they allegedly helped former Nissan executive Carlos Ghosn flee Japan and avoid trial. Last month, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer effectively made way for the father-son duo's extradition by denying a motion for more time to appeal the case.

Paul Kelly, attorney for the Taylors, confirmed to the [Associated Press](#) that his clients were turned over to Japanese authorities early Monday morning, and are set to be tried on charges related to the November 2019 smuggling of Ghosn out of the country.

The former Nissan boss was able to flee Japan, where he was facing money laundering charges, after being stowed away in large music-equipment boxes and loaded onto a private jet, according to the Taylors' legal team.

At the time of his escape, Ghosn was out on bail following a November 2018 arrest. He remains wanted on charges of breach of trust and the violation of securities laws relating to disclosing compensation.

Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. Ghosn was arrested in Japan in 2018, and was awaiting trial on charges of under-reporting future income and breach of trust when he jumped bail and escaped to Lebanon late last year.

Ghosn, who now resides in Lebanon, has denied wrongdoing and claims to have fled Japan to escape "political persecution."

The duo was compensated [around \\$1.3 million](#) for their services, according to prosecutors. Michael Taylor claimed in a February phone interview that, if they were to be [extradited](#), Japanese authorities "are clearly going to torture us."

The 60-year-old private-security specialist and US Army Green Beret-veteran also appeared to slam Washington's extradition treaty with Tokyo.

"You are sending Americans, especially during a worldwide pandemic, over to Japan, where it's known to torture people," Michael Taylor [told WBZ-TV](#). "Let all the American people know about that. That's what every American should know, that's what your government does to protect you, which is nothing."

He claimed that his wife was unable to get the attention of US President Joe Biden or someone from the US State Department. It's worth noting that the Taylors' extradition was initiated under former US President Donald Trump's administration.

According to the Taylors' legal team, their clients should not have been extradited because "bail jumping" is not illegal in Japan.

The extradition of Michael and Paul Taylor comes a week after two pilots and an official from Turkish airline company MNG Jet were convicted by an Istanbul court for assisting in Ghosn's escape.

Convicted pilots Noyan Pasin and Bahri Kutlu Somek maintained that they were unaware that Ghosn was aboard the flight.

MNG Jet official Okan Kosemen, on the other hand, did admit that he was made aware of Ghosn's presence after the first flight landed in Istanbul. Kosemen claimed he assisted in the smuggling Ghosn to the final destination of Beirut, Lebanon, because he was threatened and feared for his family's safety.

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Twitter Now Labeling Content for 'Misleading Information' on COVID-19 Vaccines by [Evan Craighead](#)

Back in December, Twitter Safety announced the social media platform would begin prioritizing the "removal of the most harmful misleading information" from users' timelines. Twitter has since removed over "8,400 Tweets and challenged 11.5 million accounts worldwide."

"Starting today, we will begin applying labels to Tweets that may contain misleading information about COVID-19 vaccines, in addition to our continued efforts to remove the most harmful COVID-19 misleading information from the service," Twitter Safety announced in a March 1 [blog post](#).

Content will reportedly be reviewed by "team members" from Twitter to determine if it violates COVID-19 misleading information [policy](#).

"Those assessments will be used to further inform our automated tools and to advance our proactive capacity to identify and label similar content across the service," the blog release read.

"Our goal is to eventually use both automated and human review to address content that violates our COVID-19 vaccine misinformation rules."

The social media platform also unveiled its new strike system, designed to "help to educate the public on our policies and further reduce the spread of potentially harmful and misleading information on Twitter, particularly for repeated moderate and high-severity violations of our rules."

While Twitter agrees to not punish someone who violates the COVID-19 misleading information policy for the first time, two and three strikes against a user will each result in 12-hour account locks. The fourth strike comes with a 7-day suspension and five (or more) strikes can get one permanently suspended from Twitter.

"Individuals will be notified directly when a label or required Tweet removal results in additional account-level enforcement," Twitter Safety noted. The decision can also be [appealed](#).

Twitter's new policies regarding misleading content and misinformation come amid social media giants' mission to curb the dissemination of false COVID-19 information.

It was reported [last week](#) by Politico that at least 110 vaccine awareness organizations were flagged and submitted to the Facebook political message registry. Such roadblocks have made many health officials reconsider the effectiveness of COVID vaccine campaigns via social media.

"[The restrictions] made it very difficult for the township in our efforts to inform our residents about important information regarding COVID-19 registration and updates," said Mary Hastings, executive administrator for Illinois' Orland Township. "This is very unfair."

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Embattled Texas Utility Chair Resigns After Deadly Winter Storm  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick previously issued a Monday statement calling for the resignations of Texas Public Utility Commission (PUC) Chair DeAnn Walker and Electric Reliability Council of Texas CEO Bill Magness over their "lack of adequate preparation" prior to the recent bouts of extreme winter weather in Texas.

Within hours of the lieutenant governor's request, Walker issued a letter to Texas Governor Greg Abbott announcing her immediate resignation from Texas' [PUC](#), the agency responsible for regulating the state's electric, telecommunication, water and sewage utilities.

"The State of Texas was devastated by a tremendous and horrific event. The events that [led] to the electric grid's failure was not caused by any one individual or group," she said, referring to the widespread electrical outages that plagued the majority of the state during, and after the week of February 14.

"The interests of many people and companies contributed to the situation we faced in the devastating storm," Walker wrote.

She urged other groups, like "gas companies, the Railroad Commission [and] the electric generators," to come forward and accept responsibility for their alleged roles in amplifying the danger of the Valentine's Day weekend storm.

"With devoted faith, I know that God will take care of me during these difficult times," she concluded.

At least 40 individuals died as a result of the recent wave of winter weather and extremely low temperatures in Texas, according to the [Associated Press](#).

"Both the PUC Chair and the ERCOT CEO said they were prepared the day before the storm hit in full force, but obviously they were not," [Patrick remarked](#), following a week of officials testifying before state lawmaking committees.

During her testimony, Walker was notably silent when asked by Texas State Rep. Rafael Anchía, a Democrat, whether she believes the public is owed an apology from the PUC.

"After two days of testimony, it is clear to me that there was a dereliction of duty and that the people of Texas deserve nothing less than for Commissioner Walker to resign immediately," Anchía said in a [Friday statement](#).

"Her inability to even muster an apology to Texans who endured freezing temperatures without heat or power and resulted in loss of life is inexcusable."

According to the lieutenant governor, PUC and ERCOT were contacted by elected officials regarding the winter storm, freezing temperatures and power outages that resulted from the extreme weather.

"Our state senators repeatedly asked for their analysis and suggestions regarding what could have been done differently and what needs to be done going forward to prevent a similar problem in the future," Patrick said Monday.

While Walker's resignation claimed no one company is to blame for the electrical outages, Houston-based electric company Griddy has branded the state's PUC as the reason for the recent surge in variable price rate - which is traditionally determined by market conditions.

"The prices charged are the direct result of the non-market prices ordered by the PUC," Valdes told the Dallas Morning News [last week](#).

Nevertheless, Texas resident Akilah Scott-Amos has filed a \$1 billion class-action lawsuit against Griddy, accusing the wholesale electric company of so-called "predatory pricing" through its variable rates package.

"The lawsuit is meritless and we plan to vigorously defend it," Valdes added.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has also introduced a lawsuit against Griddy, [claiming](#) the company "misled Texans and signed them up for services which, in a time of crisis, resulted in individual Texans each losing thousands of dollars."

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**Biden, Lopez Obrador Emphasize Willingness to Cooperate on Matters of Mutual Interest**

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador vowed at the beginning of a bilateral meeting at the White House to continue cooperation on matters of mutual interest, and specifically on economic and security interests.

"The United States and Mexico are stronger when we stand together," Biden said on Monday. "It is a long and complicated history between our nations, haven't always been perfect neighbors with one another, but we have seen over and over again the power and the purpose when we cooperate and we're safer when we work together whether it's addressing the challenges of our shared border or getting this pandemic under control."

Biden told reporters that he would be discussing during the meeting his Mexican counterpart's earlier request for US coronavirus vaccines.

Lopez Obrador said it is important for the two administrations to maintain a good relationship through constant dialogue, adding his conviction that bilateral relations will get "even better."

The United States and Mexico must maintain cooperation to further develop the bilateral relationship based on independence and autonomy, Lopez Obrador added.

In a joint statement, both leaders said they directed their top diplomats to engage with governments of neighboring countries, civil society groups, and private companies to promote sustainable economic development, combat corruption, and improve law enforcement cooperation against transnational criminal smuggling networks.

Biden and Lopez Obrador also vowed to work together to address the root cause of migration from the El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to the US southern border. They also agreed to work together to improve migration management.

Earlier on Monday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the United States will consider additional help to its neighboring nations Canada and Mexico after the American public has been vaccinated.

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**Canada's Communists Condemn Motion Declaring China's Treatment of Uyghurs 'Genocide'**

TORONTO, March 1 (Sputnik) - The Community Party of Canada denounced the Canadian parliament's motion calling on the Trudeau government to declare China's actions with respect to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province a genocide.

Canada's House of Commons adopted the motion in 266-0 vote last Monday, with Foreign Affairs Minister Marc Garneau abstaining on behalf of the government. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and more than 60 members of the governing Liberal Party were absent from the vote. "The Communist Party of Canada condemns the [Conservative] motion passed by Parliament... declaring the Uyghur people of China as the victims of genocide. This charge has no basis," it said in statement on Monday.

The Communist Party also said the charge of genocide leveled against China is a US-instigated effort aimed at undermining Beijing's growing global economic and political influence.

The Trudeau government must distance Canada from US foreign policy and to pursue bilateral negotiations with China on pressing issues such as Ottawa's ongoing detention of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou and Beijing's confinement of two Canadian nationals on charges of espionage.

China has emphasized that its activities that are at the heart of Western criticism are part of its counter-radicalization programs conducted in accordance with United Nations norms and standards. China's foreign ministry has also underscored that activities in Xianjing province are a domestic issue and called on Ottawa not to interfere.

Despite the overwhelming parliamentary support, the difficulty in enforcing the motion and Trudeau's previous comments suggest swift action on the motion is unlikely. The Prime Minister has previously cautioned against the liberal use the word "genocide," saying that it is a term guided by strict international guidelines and that any misuse would weaken the designation. Following the vote, Garneau said that Canada takes allegations of genocide very seriously and called for an international investigation into the matter.

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Biden, Lopez Obrador Emphasize Willingness to Cooperate on Matters of Mutual Interest  
WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador vowed at the beginning of a bilateral meeting at the White House to continue cooperation on matters of mutual interest, and specifically on economic and security interests.

"The United States and Mexico are stronger when we stand together," Biden said on Monday. "It is a long and complicated history between our nations, haven't always been perfect neighbors with one another, but we have seen over and over again the power and the purpose when we cooperate and we're safer when we work together whether it's addressing the challenges of our shared border or getting this pandemic under control."

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#### Yellen Says US Ready to Reengage in Talks on International Taxation - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen said during a discussion with European Commissioner for Economy Paolo Gentiloni that it was her intention to actively reengage discussions on international taxation, the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The talks held under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) explore the possibility of a global digital tax and hit a snag last year when the then-US President Donald Trump insisted on a "safe harbor" clause to allow some companies to comply voluntarily with a proposed legislation.

"The Secretary committed to re-engage actively in the ongoing OECD discussions on international taxation to forge a strong international accord," the Treasury Department said.

According to media reports, Yellen dropped the "safe harbor" demand during last month's G-20 virtual meeting.

In a phone call with Gentiloni, Yellen also conveyed her intention to deepen US-EU cooperation to beat the coronavirus pandemic, jumpstart a global economic recovery, fight income inequality and address the threat of climate change.

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#### Texas Utility Regulator Chair Resigns Over Electrical Grid Failure During Winter Storm

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - Public Utility Commission of Texas Chairwoman DeAnn Walker has resigned after millions of residents were left without power for days amid a deadly winter storm last month.

"Effective immediately, I resign as the Chairman of the Public Utility Commission of Texas," Walker said on Monday in a letter to Governor Greg Abbott. "I believe it is in the best interest of this Great State of Texas."

Walker said she has accepted her role for failing to address issues that could have prevented the mass power outage.

However, Walker also said the mass power outage was not the fault of any one individual or group. She urged other energy companies and regulators to have the courage to admit fault in the situation.

Walker said gas companies, the Railroad Commission, the electric generators, the transmission and distribution utilities, the electric cooperatives, the municipally owned utilities, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas and the Legislature are all responsible for the failing to take steps to prepare the Texas for severe winter weather.

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

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FBI Declines Comment on Concord's Request for Reward Over Prigozhin - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The FBI will not comment on the request of the Russian company Concord to pay a promised reward over revealing its owner Yevgeny Prigozhin's address, the agency's spokesperson told Sputnik.

"The FBI does not have a comment," the spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

Earlier, the FBI published via Twitter a search notice related to Russian citizens, including Prigozhin, whom the US government accuses of meddling in the US election. Concord provided such information and requested the promised reward.

The company revealed Prigozhin's address via its account in the VKontakte social network.

"We are asking to provide \$250,000 for the information," Concord said in a statement.

Russia has repeatedly refuted all accusation of interfering in the US elections.

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Texas Utility Regulator Chair Resigns in Wake of Electrical Grid Failure Amid Winter Storm

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - Public Utility Commission of Texas Chairwoman DeAnn Walker has resigned after millions of residents were left without power for days amid a deadly winter storm last month.

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Walker said on Monday in a letter to Governor Greg Abbott. "I believe it is in the best interest of this Great State of Texas."

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New York Attorney General Says Investigating Cuomo on Sexual Harassment Complaint

NEW YORK, March 1 (Sputnik) - New York Attorney-General Letitia James said on Monday that her office was moving ahead to investigate the sexual harassment complaints brought against Governor Andrew Cuomo.

"Today, we received a referral letter providing our office the authority to move forward with an independent investigation into allegations of sexual harassment claims made against Governor Cuomo," James said via Twitter on Tuesday. "At the close of the review, the findings will be disclosed in a public report."

At least two women who have worked with Cuomo have accused the governor of impropriety. One has said Cuomo forcibly tried to kiss her while the other accuses him of effectively propositioning her for a relationship.

The allegations had led to calls for an outside, independent investigation into Cuomo actions, and also for his impeachment or resignation. Cuomo, 63, has been in office for a decade. The state Attorney General's office is also investigating Cuomo for his handling of the coronavirus outbreak in New York. The office is specifically investigating the allegations of covering up the misinformation about the number of deaths of people who originally contracted the coronavirus in state nursing homes that apparently did not receive due care.

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15-Year-Old Boy Dies From Gunshot Wound After School Shooting in Arkansas - Police  
WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - A 15-year-old boy has died after being wounded in a school shooting at the Watson Chapel Junior High School in the US state of Arkansas, a Pine Bluff Police Department spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik.

"Yes, I got the call at 2:51 pm (CST) that he had passed away," the spokesperson said on Monday afternoon.

Pine Bluff Police Department Chief Kelvin Sergeant said in earlier remarks that although they currently do not know the motive for Monday morning's shooting, it did appear to be a targeted incident.

The gunman is in custody and described as 15-year-old Black male who was also a student at Watson Chapel Junior High School, Sergeant said.

No other students were injured in the incident, Sergeant added.

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US Considers Taking More Steps to Promote Accountability for Houthi Leaders - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering taking additional steps to hold the leaders of the Houthi rebel movement in Yemen accountable for their latest attacks on neighboring Saudi Arabia, US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

"Based on these complex Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia, we are considering taking additional steps to promote accountability for the Houthi leadership," Price said during a press briefing on Monday.

On Saturday, Saudi Arabia's air defenses intercepted several missile attacks, including a ballistic missile fired toward the capital Riyadh.

Price refused to elaborate on the possible punitive measures in light of the Biden administration's reversal of the previous Trump administration's decision to designate the Houthi movement as a terrorist entity.

"We call on the Houthis to cease not only their cross-border raids in Saudi Arabia, but also their military offensive in [Yemen's province of] Marib, agree to a ceasefire and to come to the negotiating table," Price said. "To make progress towards peace Houthis' conduct will have to change too."

Yemen has been for over six years gripped by a conflict between the government forces of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthi rebel. The Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia launched a military operation to support Hadi in 2015. The Houthis continue to maintain control over the vast part in the north of the country, including the capital of Sanaa.

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AstraZeneca Vaccine Not Recommended for Canadians Age 65 or Older - Advisory Committee TORONTO, March 1 (Sputnik) - The National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) said it is not recommending AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine for Canadians age 65 and older. "NACI does not recommend the use of this vaccine in individuals 65 years of age and older due to limited information on the efficacy of this vaccine in this age group at this time," the advisory committee said in its latest recommendations statement.

On Friday, Canadian health regulators authorized the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine along with the Serum Institute of India version of the vaccine.

The Canadian government has secured 2 million doses of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine version produced by the Serum Institute. The first shipment of 500,000 vaccine doses is set to arrive this week, according to Procurement Minister Anita Anand.

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US Stocks Rally Strongly Into March With Nasdaq Up 3%

NEW YORK, March 1 (Sputnik) - US stocks rallied to a strong start for March, with the tech stocks index Nasdaq rising 3 percent to lead Monday's gains, after a woeful performance in the final week of February caused by a spike in bond yields.

Nasdaq, which includes stocks of tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, closed up 396 points on Monday, recovering most of the 478 points it lost on Friday, the final session of February, to settle the first day of the new month at 13,588.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, closed up 2.4 percent on Monday, recouping virtually all that it lost last week.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest gauge of the New York Stock Exchange, settled up 2 percent, more than the 1.8 percent it lost last week.

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#### US Senate Expects 'Hardy Debate' But Will Pass COVID-19 Relief Bill - Majority Leader

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - US Senate Democrats are readying for a feisty debate with Republicans this week over the Biden administration's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package, but expects the measure to pass, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said.

"The Senate will take up the 'American Rescue Plan' this week," Schumer said in remarks on the Senate floor on Monday. "I expect a hardy debate and some late nights. But the American people sent us here with a job to do, to help the country through this moment of extraordinary challenge; to end through action the greatest health crisis our country has faced in a century. And that's just what we're going to do."

The bill passed its first test of Congress last week when it cleared the Democrat-dominated House of Representatives.

In the Senate, the Democrats have equal representation with the Republicans, holding 50 seats each, although Vice President Kamala Harris tie-breaking vote enables them a majority of one. Assuming no Republican backs Biden's bill, in order for it to pass, all Democrats have to vote along party lines. At least one Democrat - Joe Machin - has said he wishes to see bipartisan support for the bill in order to support it.

Republicans have said that only a small portion of the bill actually deals with combating the coronavirus while many parts such as foreign assistance they have deemed unnecessary. Schumer sought to allay concerns that the bill will be a waste of funds, saying it would help fund small businesses, keep teachers, firefighters and other essential employees on the job, provide food and direct cash payments to millions of impoverished Americans as well as speed up vaccinations.

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#### US, EU Closely Coordinate Response Regarding Navalny Case - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The United States closely coordinates with the European Union its response to the imprisonment of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny, State Department's spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

However, Price refused to preview any sanctions against Russia expected to be announced soon by the United States.

"I wouldn't want to speak to measures that the EU may have coming, I wouldn't want to speak to any measures that we may have coming. But suffice it to say that we have coordinated very closely. Nothing we do would take the EU by surprise and vice versa," Price said during a press briefing.

Price added that the Biden administration has been working "extraordinarily closely" with the European Union on the issue of human rights in Russia, including the Navalny case as well as those individuals who have been unjustly detained in the aftermath of his arrest.

Last week, EU diplomatic chief Josep Borrell said that EU member state foreign ministers agreed to expand sanctions against Russia over the situation concerning Navalny. On Monday, US media reported that the Biden administration is preparing to impose sanctions later this week.

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US Disappointed at Iran's Refusal to Attend Nuclear Talks, Offer Remains - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is disappointed that Iran has refused to participate in nuclear talks with the United States and European Union partners, but the offer remains on the table, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing.

"We are disappointed at Iran's response, but we remain ready to re-engage in meaningful diplomacy to achieve a mutual return to compliance under the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] commitments," Price said on Monday.

The spokesperson pointed out that the Biden administration will consult with the P5+1 partners - China, Russia, France and the United Kingdom plus Germany - on the best way forward after Iran's rejection.

On Sunday, the Wall Street Journal reported that Iran rejected the US and EU offer to have direct nuclear talks with the United States in the coming weeks as it sought guarantees that Washington would remove sanctions after the meeting.

However, Russia's Permanent Representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Mihail Ulyanov said earlier that Iran's refusal to meet for informal consultations on the nuclear agreement with the United States is not Tehran's "final say."

In 2015, Iran signed a nuclear agreement with the P5+1 countries and the European Union, stipulating the removal of international sanctions in exchange for Tehran scaling down its nuclear program. In 2018, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the agreement and re-imposed sanctions on Iran. Tehran responded by gradually abandoning its own commitments under the accord.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) -

#### PARIS COURT SENTENCES SARKOZY

\* A Paris court on Monday found former French President Nicolas Sarkozy guilty of corruption and sentenced him to three years in prison, including a two-year suspended sentence, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

\* The court's verdict will be appealed, Sarkozy's lawyer Jacqueline Laffont said.

#### JAMAL KHASHOGGI CASE

\* Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the United Nations Abdallah Al-Mouallimi said the US intelligence report, claiming that Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman had a role to play in the killing of columnist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, did not rise to proving the accusations and that the case was closed.

\* The US administration reserves the right to sanction Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in the future over the murder of Khashoggi, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters.

#### US MILITARY SUPPORT TO UKRAINE

\* The United States will provide a \$125 million security assistance package to Ukraine that includes lethal weapons, equipment and training, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

\* The new \$125 million security assistance package for Ukraine includes two armed patrol boats but no anti-tank Javelin missiles, Kirby said.

#### UNREST IN ARMENIA

\* Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said at a rally of his supporters on Monday that the country's armed forces and Chief of General Staff Onik Gasparyan had not crossed the "red line", expressing hope that they would not do this, and also suggested that former Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan had engaged in inciting the military.

\* Armenia has made no requests for Russian assistance in connection with the ongoing political situation in the country, the Russian upper house speaker, Valentina Matviyenko, told Sputnik.

\* Pashinyan's opponents broke into a prefecture in central Yerevan demanding his resignation, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

\* The Armenian Security Council on Monday called on President Armen Sarkissian to dismiss General Staff Chief Onik Gasparyan.

#### CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

\* Slovakia followed Hungary's lead and registered the Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V without waiting for the EU regulator's approval, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said in a statement on Monday.

\* Russia's Federal Medical-Biological Agency is working on a coronavirus vaccine that provides cell-bound immunity, since this type of immunity can protect a person for up to 17 years, agency head Veronika Skvortsova told Russian President Vladimir Putin.

\* The Russian vaccines are effective against the coronavirus variants that seem to scare everyone in Europe, Putin said.

#### NAVALNY CASE

\* The administration of US president Joe Biden is preparing to impose sanctions against Russia later this week over the imprisonment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, CNN reported on Monday citing two officials.

\* UN Special Rapporteur Agnes Callamard said that Russia was likely responsible for the alleged poisoning of Navalny.

\* Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova reacted to the statement of UN special rapporteurs on the situation with Navalny, noting that "our desires to find the truth in this case coincide;" she believes that after their call Berlin will stop hiding "classified materials" and formulas of detected substances from the international community.

\* The Strasbourg court accepted for consideration Russia's request to reverse the decision on provisional measures for Navalny, Russia's representative in the ECHR, Deputy Justice Minister Mikhail Galperin, said.

\* The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) blatantly interfered in Russia's affairs when it granted an interim measure in favor of opposition figure Alexey Navalny and demanded his immediate release, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said.

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US Urging Saudi Arabia to Disband Rapid Intervention Force - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is urging Saudi Arabia to disband its Rapid Intervention Force, the hit squad that allegedly assassinated columnist Jamal Khashoggi, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"We are aware of a network known as the Rapid Intervention Force, a unit of the Saudi Royal Guard that has engaged in counter-dissident operations, including the operation that resulted in the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi," Price said in a press briefing. "We have urged Saudi Arabia to disband this group and then adopt institutional systemic reforms and controls to ensure that anti-dissident activities and operations cease."

Moreover, Price mentioned that the United States was not in a position to identify the 76 individuals subject to visa restrictions under the Khashoggi ban.

On Friday, the US intelligence community declassified a report saying that the Saudi crown prince had approved the operation that killed Khashoggi in 2018.

In light of the report, the Biden administration announced 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.

The US Treasury also announced sanctions against former deputy head of Saudi intelligence, Ahmed al-Asiri, and the crown prince's personal protective detail.

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UN Chief Calls \$1.7Bln in Pledges at Yemen Donors Conference 'Disappointing'

UNITED NATIONS, March 1 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the result of Monday's High-Level Pledging Event on Yemen, which mobilized nearly \$1.7 billion, was disappointing.

"The outcome of today's High-Level Pledging Event on Yemen is disappointing. Pledges announced total approximately \$1.7 billion," Guterres said. "That is less than we received for the humanitarian response plan in 2020. And a billion dollars less than was pledged at the conference we held in 2019."

At the opening of the conference earlier on Monday, Guterres urged international donors to pledge \$3.85 billion to support 16 million people in Yemen this year.

Of the total \$1.67 billion announced by donors, Saudi Arabia's \$430 million commitment was at the top of the pledging list. It was followed by Germany with over \$244 million pledged, the United Arab Emirates with \$230 million and the United States with \$191 million.

The European Commission announced it will support the humanitarian action in Yemen with some \$116 million and Canada said it will contribute \$56 million.

The Yemen conference, co-hosted by the United Nations, Sweden and Switzerland, fell short to not only mobilize the requested money, but also to collect at least \$1.9 billion needed to provide the minimum amount of food to prevent famine in Yemen this year.

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Biden Administration to Consider Imposing Carbon Border Adjustment Tax - Trade Report

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will consider imposing carbon border adjustment taxes to fight climate change, a report released by the US Trade Representative (USTR) revealed on Monday.

"The Biden Administration will work with allies and partners that are committed to fighting climate change," the report said. "As appropriate, and consistent with domestic approaches to reduce US greenhouse gas emissions, this includes consideration of carbon border adjustments."

The plans were included in the Biden administration's 2021 Trade Agenda and 2020 Annual Report to Congress.

The report said these policies will include exploring and developing market and regulatory approaches to address greenhouse gas emissions in the global trading system, the report explained.

"The trade agenda will support the Biden Administration's comprehensive vision of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and achieving net-zero global emissions by 2050, or before, by fostering US innovation and production of climate-related technology and promoting resilient renewable energy supply chains," the report said.

The Biden administration will also work with allies as they develop their own approaches and act against trading partners that fail to meet their environmental obligations under existing trade agreements, the report noted.

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#### US Vows to Use All Tools to Counter China's 'Unfair' Trade Practices - Report

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration in a report to Congress on Monday said it will use every available tool to counter a broad spectrum of unfair trade practices committed by China.

"The Biden Administration is committed to using all available tools to take on the range of China's unfair trade practices that continue to harm US workers and businesses," the report, which was released by the US Trade Representative, said.

These detrimental actions, according to the report, include tariff and non-tariff barriers that restrict market access, forced labor, and subsidizing exports, among others.

The US also accused China of coercive technology transfers, infringement of intellectual property, censorship and unfair treatment of American firms in numerous sectors.

The Biden administration will also make Uighur human rights a top priority, the report added, and vowed to work closely with US allies to address these issues.

Chinese officials have repeatedly denied US allegations of unfair trade practices and human rights abuses.

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#### US to Evaluate Saudi Arms Sales on Case-by-Case Basis - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The United States will evaluate arms sales to Saudi Arabia on a case-by-case basis through a process led by the National Security Council, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

"The NSC leads the process to evaluate proposed weapons transfers. That's the way it should be. They will be evaluated... on a case-by-case basis going forward," Price said during a daily briefing.

He was speaking days after the US released a declassified intelligence report accusing Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman of approving an operation to kill or kidnap dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The US put on a pause several arms deals with Saudi Arabia within the context of withdrawing support for offensive operations in Yemen and a diplomatic bid to end the war there.

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US in UNSC Presidency Will Monitor 'Very Closely' Military Coup in Myanmar - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 1 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday the situation around the military coup in Myanmar will be high on her country's agenda during its presidency over the UN Security Council in March. "The undemocratic coup in Burma [Myanmar] is a particular concern, and we will be monitoring that very closely in our presidency," Thomas-Greenfield said in a press briefing.

Thomas-Greenfield, who assumed her role as the US envoy on Thursday, added Washington is committed to using its "renewed engagement" at the UN headquarters in New York to influence the military to reverse the coup and restore the democratically-elected government.

She also praised the recent address of Myanmar's UN envoy U Kyaw Moe Tun at the UN General Assembly, in which he announced that he had broken ranks with the Asian country's new government and called on the international community to oppose the coup.

"I think it caught all of us off guard," Thomas-Greenfield said. "None of us expected to hear that, and I commend him for his bravery."

Myanmar's military overthrew the government and declared a year-long state of emergency on February 1, hours before the newly-elected parliament was due to convene. The nation's de facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was arrested alongside other senior officials, after the military accused her party of rigging the November elections.

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White House Urges House to Pass 'Landmark' George Floyd Police Reform Bill

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration on Monday called on the US House to pass the recently reintroduced George Floyd police reform bill.

Last week, US House Democrats reintroduced the police reform legislation, which is named in honor of Floyd, a 46-year-old black man who died in police custody last May.

"The Administration encourages the House to pass this legislation, and looks forward to working with the Congress to enact a landmark policing reform law," Biden said.

The bill was first passed last year in the House amid riots sparked after Floyd was killed in a chokehold by a police officer after pleading that he could not breathe. But the then-Republican majority in the Senate sat on the bill. The Democrats regained control of the Senate in January elections.

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US Not Considering Sharing COVID-19 Vaccines with Mexico, Focus on Americans - White House

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is not considering sharing COVID-19 vaccines with Mexico at the moment, citing the Biden administration's focus on vaccinating the American public, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is expected to ask President Joe Biden for access to US supplies of the COVID-19 vaccine during their virtual bilateral meeting later in the day.

"No, the President [Joe Biden] made clear that he is focused on ensuring vaccines are accessible to every American," Psaki told reporters in response to a question about Lopez Obrador's expected request.

Psaki said the United States will consider additional help to neighboring nations - Canada and Mexico - after the American public has been vaccinated.

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UPDATE 2 - Pentagon to Provide Ukraine With \$125Mln in Weapons, Other Security Aid - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide a new \$125 million security assistance package to Ukraine that includes two patrol boats, equipment and training, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Monday.

"The Department is announcing a new \$125 million package for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which includes training, equipment, and advisory efforts to help Ukraine's forces preserve the country's territorial integrity, secure its borders and improve interoperability with NATO," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson pointed out that the latest action "reaffirms the United States' commitment to providing defensive lethal weapons to enable Ukraine to more effectively defend itself against Russian aggression."

Kirby explained that the new security aid package includes two armed patrol boats, but does not include Javelin anti-tank missiles that the United States had provided to Ukraine in the past.

"That package announced today will include two Mark VI armed patrol boats that will help Ukraine defend its territorial waters. That will include some training, equipment and advisory efforts from us. This will now make our commitment a total of eight patrol boats," Kirby said. The package was funded through the State Department's foreign military financing, he also said.

The United States encourages Ukraine to modernize its defenses in line with NATO principles and standards and stands committed to assist it with reforms, Kirby added.

Since 2014, the US has committed well over \$1.6 billion in security assistance to Ukraine, including 360 Javelin anti-tank missiles, according to the US officials.

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UN Chief Discusses Yemen War With Yemeni Prime Minister, Iran's Zarif - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 1 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Monday held separate phone conversations on the conflict in Yemen with the country's Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalek Saeed and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

"I can say that the Secretary-General is continuing his active contacts to support the UN political process to stop the conflict in Yemen," Dujarric said. "To that end, he had separate phone calls this morning with Maeen Abdulmalek Saeed, the Prime Minister of Yemen, and Javad Zarif, the Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

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Kirby explained that the new security aid package includes two armed patrol boats, but does not include Javelin anti-tank missiles that the United States had provided to Ukraine in the past.

"That package announced today will include two Mark 4 armed patrol boats that will help Ukraine defend its territorial waters. That will include some training, equipment and advisory efforts from us. This will now make our commitment a total of eight patrol boats," Kirby said. The package was funded through the State Department's foreign military financing, he also said.

The United States encourages Ukraine to modernize its defenses in line with NATO principles and standards and stands committed to assist it with reforms, Kirby added.

Since 2014, the US has committed well over \$1.6 billion in security assistance to Ukraine, including 360 Javelin anti-tank missiles, according to the US officials.

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#### Biden Administration to Explore Paths for Reunited Migrant Families to Stay in US - DHS

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will explore legal options for reunited migrant families to remain in the United States, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said on Monday.

US President Joe Biden has identified reversal of the former administration's previous family separation policy as a top priority. Under former President Donald Trump, the US Justice Department adopted a "zero-tolerance policy" for immigration offenses that required prosecution of all illegal entry referrals at the southwest border - including misdemeanors - and regardless if the migrant adult was with a family unit.

"We are hoping to reunite the families either here or in the country [of] origin. We hope to be in the position to give them the election and if, in fact, they seek to reunite here in the United States, we will explore lawful pathways for them to remain in the United States," Mayorkas told reporters.

The head of the Department of Homeland Security added that he is coordinating with the foreign ministers of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras – countries from which the majority affected individuals originate – as well as non-governmental organizations (NGO) and the private to correct a Trump-era policy he has derided as cruel.

Some 5,500 migrant families were separated as a result of the policy. The US government is reportedly still trying to find the parents of more than 600 children.

Biden signed three executive orders including one that called for the creation of a task force to reunify separated families

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UN, Partners Seek \$189Mln to Assist 451,000 People in Libya This Year - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 1 (Sputnik) - The United Nations and aid organization appealed for \$189 million to support 451,000 of the most vulnerable people in Libya, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Monday.

"Aid organizations are appealing for \$189 million to meet pressing humanitarian needs in the country in 2021," Dujarric said. "The funding will provide critical supplies to 451,000 people." According to Dujarric, the funding will support only 36% of the 1.3 million people in need of assistance this year.

Those targeted will include individuals in the collapse of living standards, relying on negative coping strategies, facing widespread physical and mental harm, as well as returnees, migrants and refugees.

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Pentagon Chief Convenes First Meeting of China Task Force - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) – US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin conducted his first meeting of the China Task Force with dozens of civilian and military experts, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"Today's meeting is intended to formalize the mission, timing, and outputs of the Task Force as they work toward a baseline of DoD [Department of Defense] policies, programs and processes on China-related matters," Kirby said in a statement via Twitter.

The task force will be working on an interagency basis and consulting with Congress, he added. Most of the group's findings will be classified, Kirby noted.

US President Joe Biden announced the creation of a new China Task Force in mid-February. The Pentagon said in a fact sheet that it will review high-priority matters related to Beijing, including bilateral defense relations, intelligence and US alliances and partnerships and issue recommendations within the next four months.

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#### Senior US Health Official Warns About Potential Surge in New COVID-19 Cases

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky warned on Monday about a potential surge in new coronavirus (COVID-19) cases after the declining trajectory appears to have stalled.

"I remain deeply concerned about a potential shift of the trajectory of the pandemic," Walensky said in a press briefing. "The latest CDC data continue to suggest the recent declines in cases have leveled off at a very high number."

Walensky said now is not the time for states to relax public health measures put in place to contain the disease, adding that the US public currently has the ability to stop a fourth surge of cases in the United States.

The current seven-day average of 67,200 new coronavirus cases each day represents an increase of more than 2 percent compared to the previous seven-day average.

In addition, Walensky added, the average number of daily COVID-19 deaths has increased more than 2 percent to nearly 2,000 deaths per day.

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#### US Intelligence Removed 3 Names from Khashoggi Report - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - US intelligence removed three names that were erroneously mentioned among the suspects in its declassified report on the murder of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, CNN said on Monday.

"We put a revised document on the website because the original one erroneously contained three names which should not have been included," a spokesman for the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence said as quoted in the report.

The report published last Friday accused Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman of approving an operation to kill or capture Khashoggi in 2018.

According to CNN, the report was swiftly taken down and replaced with another version. The document now mentions 21 men, who allegedly "participated in, ordered, or were otherwise complicit in or responsible for the death of Jamal Khashoggi on behalf of Muhammad bin Salman."

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### Saudi Envoy to UN Says US Report on Khashoggi 'Does Not Rise' to Proving Accusations

UNITED NATIONS, March 1 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Abdallah Al-Mouallimi said the US intelligence report, claiming that Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman had a role to play in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, did not rise to proving the accusations and that the case was closed.

"The report, therefore, is based on could've, should've and would've and does not rise to anywhere close to proving the accusation beyond a reasonable doubt," Al-Mouallimi said via Twitter. "The Prince courageously accepted moral responsibility, presented the accused to the justice system, and pledged to reform the intelligence organizations. Case closed!"

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### US Senate Judiciary Panel Advances Nomination of Biden's Attorney General Pick Garland

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Judiciary Committee on Monday advanced the nomination of President Joe Biden's pick for Attorney General, Merrick Garland.

The committee advanced Garland's nomination with a 15-7 vote, sending it to the Senate floor for consideration.

Garland also said Biden in their discussions about him taking the job had made clear that the attorney general would have full, independent discretion about whom to investigate and prosecute for alleged crimes and that the president had never raised the issue of whether his own son Hunter Biden should or should not be investigated.

Garland, who successfully prosecuted white supremacist Timothy McVeigh for blowing up a Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 168 people including 19 children, said that since then he had developed strong concerns about the use and abuse of the death penalty in the United States. McVeigh was executed by lethal injection in 2001.

In 2016, Garland was nominated by then-President Barack Obama for the Supreme Court but the Republican majority controlling the Senate refused to let his nomination be discussed until Obama left office.

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### One Student Injured in School Shooting in US state of Arkansas - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - One student has been injured in a school shooting in the US state of Arkansas, the Watson Chapel School District said on Monday.

"There has been a shooting at the Watson Chapel Junior High. All campuses are on lock down. The Jefferson County Sheriff's Department and the Pine Bluff Police Department are on site to control the situation," the school district said in a statement.

The school district said the shooting was an isolated incident and all students are safe except for one student who was injured.

The condition of the injured student is unknown.

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UN Chief Calls \$1.7Bln in Pledges at Yemen Donors Conference 'Disappointing'

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At the opening of the conference earlier on Monday, Guterres urged international donors to pledge \$3.85 billion to support 16 million people in Yemen this year.

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One Iran-Backed Militia Member Killed, 2 Injured in Last Week's US Airstrikes - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - One militia member was killed and two others injured in the US airstrike in eastern Syria last week, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"We believe right now there was likely one militia member killed and two militia members wounded," Kirby said in a press briefing.

Kirby said it is unknown if the militia member killed is of Iranian origin.

Last week, 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 that 17 people were killed in the strikes. However, Iraqi lawmaker Kataa Rikabi told Sputnik the strikes had hit a warehouse and no one was injured.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the Russian military was warned about the airstrikes five minutes before it began.

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New York Attorney General Warns of 'Extreme Risks' in Cryptocurrencies

NEW YORK, March 1 (Sputnik) - New York Attorney General Letitia James on Monday warned Americans they could face crippling losses from unprotected trading in cryptocurrencies. James' office shut down digital currency trading platform Bitfinex last week and fined its operators \$18.5 million for defrauding investors over some \$850 million of losses.

"There are extreme risks in investing in virtual or cryptocurrencies and it's imperative that we act to protect investors' wallets," James said via Twitter. "I'm warning New Yorkers and investors across the country that investing in this unstable market is not prudent and could cause devastating losses."

James' remarks came as Bitcoin, the number one digital currency, fell some 10 percent in value over the weekend before recovering in Monday's trade. Cryptocurrencies, in general, are volatile because they have no intrinsic value and are often associated with funding for illicit activity. Bitcoin, for instance, rallied from below \$10,800 in September to record highs above \$58,000 last month.

Separately, the Justice Department said last week it had charged a 45-year-old Serbian residing in New York with hatching a bogus cryptocurrency scheme using two fraudulent online investment platforms to solicit some \$7 million from unsuspecting Americans.

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US Prioritizes Immigrant Visa Services After Biden Eased Restrictions - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The State Department has started providing at least some immigrant visa services at 90 percent of its posts around the world as a priority next only to assisting US citizens, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services Julie Stufft told reporters on Monday.

Stufft said there are no general restrictions in place on issuing immigrant visas after President Joe Biden rescinded his predecessor's Proclamation 10014 that suspended the entry of immigrants deemed to be a risk to the US labor market during the coronavirus outbreak.

"More than 90 percent of our 136 immigrant visa-processing posts are processing at least some immigrant visa services... Only 43 of 233 non-immigrant visa processing posts are processing routine non-immigrants," she said during a phone briefing.

Stufft explained that once US citizens are assisted, "immigrant visas are the next priority."

US consular workers will resume appointments for applicants who were affected Presidential Proclamation 10014, she said.

Stufft also described coronavirus pandemic-related restrictions as the main "bottleneck" for visa operations with applicants in China, Iran, Brazil, Ireland, South Africa and the United Kingdom as well as the 26 countries of the Schengen area who are currently unable to enter the United States.

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## New US Envoy to UN Says Looks Forward to Engaging With Russia's Nebenzia to Promote Peace

UNITED NATIONS, March 1 (Sputnik) - New US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday that she is looking forward to engaging with her Russian counterpart Vassily Nebenzia to promote peace, prosperity and security in the world.

"I met with the Russian Permanent Representative last Friday, and I look forward to engaging with him and with my colleagues there," Thomas-Greenfield said in her first press briefing.

"We have our differences... but we also have areas where we hope to be able to cooperate with the Russians, particularly as we work together on the Security Council to bring peace, prosperity and security to the world," she said.

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## US House Panel to Probe Billions Wasted on Afghan Reconstruction Projects - Chair

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - A US House national security panel will hold a hearing later in March to examine Afghan reconstruction activities after more wasted funding was uncovered by a watchdog agency, chair Stephen Lynch said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, the US Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) said it found \$2.4 billion in capital assets that were unused or abandoned among \$7.8 billion examined in a new audit.

"On Tuesday, March 16, 2021, at 11:00 am [EST], the Subcommittee on National Security will hold a hearing to examine areas of US reconstruction activity that SIGAR has deemed high-risk and vulnerable to waste, fraud, and abuse," Lynch said in a statement.

Since 2002, the US has spent more than \$140 billion on reconstruction assistance in Afghanistan with at least \$20 billion lost due to fraud and abuse, SIGAR said in a report last October.

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## US Reserves Right to Sanction Saudi Crown Prince Over Khashoggi Case - White House

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The US administration reserves the right to sanction Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in the future over the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Monday.

"Of course, we reserve the right to take any action at a time and manner... [of] our choosing," Psaki said.

Washington usually does not sanction government leaders of countries, which have diplomatic relations with the United States, she added.

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**New \$125Mn Package for Ukraine Includes 2 Patrol Boats, No Javelin Missiles - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The new \$125 million security assistance package for Ukraine includes 2 armed patrol boats but no javelin missiles, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said in a press briefing on Monday.

"That package announced today will include two Mark 4 armed patrol boats that will help Ukraine defend its territorial waters... there are no javelin missiles included in this package," Kirby said.

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**Ivory Coast, Ghana Start Vaccinating Medical Workers Against Coronavirus - WHO**

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The governments of Ghana and the Ivory Coast have launched campaigns to vaccinate health care workers against the novel coronavirus, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced in a news release on Monday.

"[T]he first COVID-19 vaccination campaigns in Africa using COVAX doses began today in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire," the release said. "These campaigns are among the first to use doses provided by the COVAX Facility's Gavi COVAX Advanced Market Commitment (AMC)."

The campaigns in Ghana and the Ivory Coast come after vaccine deliveries were made to both countries last week of 600,000 doses and 504,000 doses, respectively. Both countries received the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine licensed and manufactured by the Serum Institute of India. Ghana President Nana Akufo-Addo said in the release that the country welcomes the arrival of the first coronavirus vaccine doses through the COVAX AMC as a pathway to ending the acute phase of the pandemic.

"To maximise the public health benefit of the vaccine, the first doses will be prioritized for health and essential workers, and other at-risk group," Akufo-Addo said.

A further 11 million doses are expected to be delivered over the next seven days and the allocation of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine to 142 of COVAX participating economies to be delivered between now and the end of May is expected to take place on Tuesday, according to the release.

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**One Iran-Backed Militia Member Killed, 2 Injured in Last Week's US Airstrikes - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - One militia member was killed and two others injured in the US airstrike in eastern Syria last week, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"We believe right now there was likely one militia member killed and two militia members wounded," Kirby said in a press briefing.

Kirby said it is unknown if the militia member killed is of Iranian origin.

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Pentagon to Provide \$125Mln to Ukraine in Lethal Weapons, Other Security Aid - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide a \$125 million security assistance package to Ukraine that includes lethal weapons, equipment, and training, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"The Department is announcing a \$125 million package for the Ukraine Security Assistance initiative, which includes training, equipment, and advisory efforts," Kirby said in a press briefing.

"This action reaffirms the US commitment to providing defensive lethal weapons to enable Ukraine to more effectively defend itself against Russian aggression."

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US Investing \$260Mln to Create Jobs, Restore Land in Coal Areas - Interior Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The US government is investing more than \$260 million to help create jobs and revitalize land in coal communities, the Department of the Interior said in a press release issued by the White House on Monday.

"As part of the Biden-Harris administration's commitment to helping stabilize communities hit hardest by the decrease in demand for coal energy, the Department of the Interior today announced the availability of more than \$260 million for states and Tribes to support reclamation efforts in fiscal year 2021," the release said.

More than \$152.22 million is now available through the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act's Abandoned Mine Land (AML) grant program and the Interior Department is also disbursing \$115 million through the Abandoned Mine Land Economic Revitalization grant program, the release added.

"The Abandoned Mine Land grant programs provide an important opportunity to revitalize local economies, support jobs, and address environmental impacts to communities from these legacy developments," Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management Laura Daniel Davis said in the release.

The US state of West Virginia will receive \$18.9 million to reclaim abandoned mine lands in those coal communities. Senator Joe Manchin, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee said in the release. West Virginia will also get \$25 million through the AML Economic Revitalization grant program, he added.

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#### All Apple Stores in US Open First Time Since COVID-19 - Reports

NEW YORK, March 1 (Sputnik) - Apple has opened all of its 270 stores in the United States for business for the first time in almost a year since the implementation of the restrictive coronavirus pandemic measures, a spokesman for the tech giant told CNBC on Monday.

Apple's last closed US locations in Texas reopened as the United States began to emerge from the pandemic-related lockdowns, after a drop in infection rates and ramp-up in vaccine distributions for the virus, the report said.

However, Apple will not receive walk-in customers everywhere in order to protect its customers and some stores will operate on an appointment-only basis, the report added.

On March 13, 2020, Apple announced that it was closing all of its stores outside China as the coronavirus began spreading around the world. At the time, the closings were only scheduled through March 27.

Since that first announcement, Apple has proactively reopened and reclosed locations around the world, often acting in advance of official government restrictions.

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#### Texas Sues Power Provider for Boosting Prices in Winter Storm Crisis - Court Document

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has launched a legal action against the Griddy Energy utilities power providing company saying it boosted energy consumers' bills after failing to make adequate preparations to deal with severe winter weather, a court document said on Monday.

"[T]he State alleges that Defendants engaged in false, misleading, and deceptive acts and practices in violation of ... the Texas Deceptive Trade Practices-Consumer Protection Act," the document said. "Griddy was fully aware of the reality of the risk in its pricing scheme - sky-high energy rates at a time when consumers are the most vulnerable."

Texans who relied on the electric provider Griddy to heat their homes and protect their families were shocked to learn that they were incurring astronomical electricity bills, Paxton noted in the filing.

"[T]he company that promised Texans cheap 'wholesale' prices that would consistently beat traditional energy costs, blatantly contradicted these promotional representations as it auto-debited hundreds of dollars from Texans' checking accounts daily," the document said. February winter storms left millions of Texans without power, leading state officials, including Governor Greg Abbott, to blame the utility companies. Griddy said in a statement on its website that the Energy Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT), the grid's operator, had shut the company down and claimed it was scapegoated.

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US Preparing to Impose Sanctions Against Russia Over Navalny This Week - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The administration of US president Joe Biden is preparing to impose sanctions against Russia later this week over the the imprisonment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, CNN reported on Monday citing two officials.

The US government plans to impose the new sanctions in coordination with its European Union allies, the report said. The specific restrictive measures will be outlined by US and EU officials in the coming days, it added.

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COVID-19 Could Have Long-Term Effect on Office Space Demand, Inflation - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, March 1 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus pandemic may have dealt a long-term blow to demand for office and retail space in the United States, as well as on inflation expectations, Federal Reserve Governor Lael Brainard told the Annual Washington Conference of the Institute of International Bankers on Monday.

"Commercial real estate prices are susceptible to declines if the pace of distressed transactions picks up or if the pandemic leads to permanent changes in patterns of use," Brainard said. "Low sensitivity of inflation to resource utilization could be expected to contribute to a low-for-long interest rate environment."

New York City's commercial-real-estate sector put forth a proposal in December to turn some 1 million square feet of office space into housing as values of troubled retail properties sank 53 percent in 2020 from closures and inoccupancies forced by the pandemic measures, real-estate data platforms Trepp and CompStak reported.

In terms of retail sales, online spending represented 21.3 percent of total sales for last year, up from just 5.1 percent a decade ago, according to industry group Digital Commerce 360 estimates. Pandemic-related boosts in online shopping itself have resulted in an additional \$174.87 billion in e-commerce revenue in 2020, Digital Commerce 360 estimated.

Brainard said the decline in demand for office space due to higher rates of remote work or for retail space due to a permanent shift toward online shopping could be among the long-term impacts of the pandemic.

To prevent further erosion, the sector would need strong capital and liquidity from banks, which themselves faced significant challenges from higher-than-normal uncertainty, she said.

"Some sectors of commercial real estate loans and commercial and industrial loans are more vulnerable than before the crisis," Brainard said. "Although losses and delinquency rates on bank loans are currently low, performance could deteriorate as borrowers exit forbearance, with

particularly hard-hit businesses and households facing arrears on rent and mortgage payments.”

In terms of inflation, Brainard said the Federal Reserve’s long-term target of achieving a 2 percent inflation rate could be complicated by changes in the economic environment associated with low equilibrium interest rates, persistently below-target trend inflation, and low sensitivity of inflation to resource utilization.

“In these kinds of environments, it is valuable to deploy macroprudential tools, such as the countercyclical capital buffer, to mitigate potential increases in financial imbalances,” Brainard added.

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**Guterres Urges Parties in Yemen to Work With UN Special Envoy to Reach Peaceful Resolution**

UNITED NATIONS, March 1 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Monday urged the parties in Yemen to work with Special Envoy Martin Griffiths to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.

"I urge all parties to work with my Special Envoy, Martin Griffiths, to reach a peaceful resolution to the conflict. All our actions must be driven by this," Guterres said during a United Nations pledging conference to mobilize aid for Yemen.

The UN Secretary-General pointed out that with two out of every three people in need of some form of assistance across Yemen, the worst hunger is seen in areas affected by the conflict. Guterres noted that the conflict in Yemen has no military solution and the only path to end the war and alleviate humanitarian suffering lies through an immediate and nationwide ceasefire.

"This is the fifth time we have convened a high-level pledging event... The bitter truth is that we will convene a sixth event next year, unless the war ends," Guterres said

Yemen has been ravaged by an internal conflict between government forces and the Houthi movement for over six years. The situation worsened after the Saudi-led coalition started an air campaign against the Houthi rebels in Yemen in 2015, leading to arguably the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. The United Nations has reported that more than 24 million of Yemenis, or 80 percent of the country’s population, require humanitarian aid.

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**Canada ‘Disturbed’ by Hong Kong Charging Pro-Democracy Activists - Foreign Minister**

TORONTO, March 1 (Sputnik) - Canada condemns the arrests of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong and urges authorities to comply with obligations under the Sino-British Joint Declaration, Minister of Foreign Affairs Marc Garneau said on Monday.

Sunday raids across Hong Kong resulted in arrests of 47 pro-democracy activists and politicians who were charged with conspiracy to commit subversion. If convicted, they will be jailed for life. "Canada is disturbed by the charges laid against 47 individuals for participating in primary elections in Hong Kong. We call on authorities to uphold rights and freedoms, in line with China's international obligations under the China-Great Britain Joint Declaration," Garneau said in a statement via Twitter.

Subversion was made a criminally punishable offense in Hong Kong last year under the Beijing-drafted National Security Law. According to Beijing, the legislation criminalizes activities related to terrorism, separatism, subversion of state power and collusion with foreign forces, while local pro-democracy activists and certain Western nations claim that the law undermines Hong Kong's civil liberties and democratic freedoms.

Canada, along with other so-called Five Eyes intelligence-sharing allies, has stressed that the National Security Law is a breach of the Sino-British Joint Declaration that undermines the One Country-Two Systems framework.

Sino-Canadian relations soured after the Canadian authorities detained Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States to which China is alleged to have responded by arresting two Canadian nationals on charges of espionage in China. The tense relationship has been further exacerbated by Canada's condemnation of the new Chinese law on national security in Hong Kong.

Chinese officials have claimed that Canada's deference to US foreign policy served as a catalyst for the growing diplomatic rift.

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**Saudi Arabia Pledges \$430Mln to Support UN's Yemen Humanitarian Plan for 2021 - KS Relief**

UNITED NATIONS, March 1 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia has pledged to provide \$430 million to support the UN humanitarian response plan for Yemen this year, King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center Supervisor-General Abdullah Al Rabeeah said in a pledging event on Monday.

"I am pleased to announce that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has pledged \$430 million to support the Yemen humanitarian response plan 2021 to be implemented through UN agencies, international organizations, and local and regional non-governmental organizations," Al Rabeeah said.

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**UN Chief Urges Donors to Give 'Generously' to Meet Appeal for \$3.85Bln in Yemen Aid**

UNITED NATIONS, March 1 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Monday called on international donors to give "generously" to meet the United Nations' appeal for \$3.85 billion in aid to support 16 million people facing famine in Yemen.

"This year, we need \$3.85 billion to support 16 million Yemenis on the brink of catastrophe," Guterres said while opening the high-level pledging event for humanitarian crisis Yemen. "I implore all donors to fund our appeal generously today to stop famine engulfing the country." Guterres said that the humanitarian situation in the country has never been worse, and over 20 million Yemenis require aid and protection.

Children and women are among the hardest hit, Guterres pointed out. He said that this year, almost half of all children under five are set to suffer from malnutrition, and some 400,000 of them could die without urgent treatment.

The UN chief also noted that last year, humanitarian funding for Yemen declined. "Today, reducing aid is a death sentence for entire families," Guterres said.

Humanitarian partners last year received \$1.9 billion - just half of what was required - and half of the money collected in 2019 to address the humanitarian crisis.

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US Pledges to Provide \$191Mln in Additional Aid to Yemen - Blinken

UNITED NATIONS, March 1 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide nearly \$191 million in additional aid to Yemen, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday at the UN high-level pledging event.

"Today, I'm pleased to announce nearly \$191 million in additional humanitarian assistance from the United States, bringing our fiscal year 2021 funding up to more than \$350 million."

Blinken said both Saudi Arabia and Yemen's government are "committed and eager" to find a solution to the conflict in Yemen and called on Yemen's Houthi rebels to match their commitment.