

**03/03/21 Wednesday**

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Buckingham Palace to Look Into Bullying Allegations Against Meghan Markle  
by [Mary F.](#)

A blockbuster article published in British newspaper The Times on Tuesday accused the Duchess of Sussex Meghan Markle of bullying staff in 2018 while living at Kensington Palace with Prince Harry. The allegations have been refuted by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. Buckingham Palace on Wednesday released a statement noting it would investigate the allegations made in [The Times](#) article that Meghan Markle bullied Kensington Palace staff in 2018. The report accuses Markle of bullying two senior staff members and humiliating another former employee.

"We are clearly very concerned about allegations in The Times following claims made by former staff of The Duke and Duchess of Sussex," the palace said in the statement, obtained by [Today](#). "Accordingly our HR team will look into the circumstances outlined in the article. Members of staff involved at the time, including those who have left the Household, will be invited to participate to see if lessons can be learned."

"The Royal Household has had a Dignity at Work policy in place for a number of years and does not and will not tolerate bullying or harassment in the workplace," the statement continues. The claims made in the British newspaper come just days before an interview between Oprah Winfrey and the royal couple is scheduled to air in a two-hour Sunday special on CBS. In the interview, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex are expected to discuss the pressure Meghan faced before the couple in 2020 decided to step down as senior members of the royal family and move to Southern California.

In a statement to NBC News, a spokesperson for Harry and Meghan denied the allegations made in the report.

"Let's just call this what it is — a calculated smear campaign based on misleading and harmful misinformation," a spokesperson told [NBC News](#). "We are disappointed to see this defamatory portrayal of The Duchess of Sussex given credibility by a media outlet. It's no coincidence that distorted several-year-old accusations aimed at undermining The Duchess are being briefed to the British media shortly before she and The Duke are due to speak openly and honestly about their experience of recent years."

A spokesperson for the Duke and Duchess of Sussex also said in a Wednesday statement to ITK that Markle is "saddened by this latest attack on her character, particularly as someone who has been the target of bullying herself and is deeply committed to supporting those who have experienced pain and trauma," [the Hill reported](#).

Last year, Markle and Prince Harry moved with their 1-year-old son, Archie, to California. The couple last month also confirmed to Buckingham Palace that they would not be returning as working members of the Royal Family, the Palace announced in an official statement.

“Following conversations with The Duke, The Queen has written confirming that in stepping away from the work of The Royal Family it is not possible to continue with the responsibilities and duties that come with a life of public service,” Buckingham Palace said in a [press release](#).

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‘Unconstitutional Power Grab’: Pence Slams Democrats’ Sweeping Voting Reform Bill by [Mary F.](#)

Democrats have proposed a series of election reforms known as H.R.1 or the For the People Act. The bill, which the House is expected to vote on this week, addresses several issues including voter suppression, partisan gerrymandering, election security, campaign finance law and public campaign financing.

In a Wednesday [op-ed](#) for The Daily Signal, former vice president Mike Pence took aim at H.R.1, first introduced in 2019, claiming that the House Democrats’ proposal is a “constitutional power grab” by “leftists.”

The bill includes provisions to expand early and absentee voting, to allow voters to register online on Election Day and to restore voting rights for felons. Republicans have argued that the bill would lead to increased voter fraud since it would allow voters to register on Election Day. The [bill](#) would also end partisan gerrymandering, by requiring independent commissions to redraw congressional districts. In addition, the bill aims to shine a “light on dark money in politics” by mandating that all organizations in political activity identify their large donors. The bill also promises to crack down on the spread of voter disinformation and voter intimidation. In his blog, Pence argued that the “tragic events” at the Capitol on January 6 have “deprived the American people of a substantive discussion in Congress about election integrity in America.” “Congress will vote this week on HR 1, the so-called For the People Act, a massive 800-page election overhaul bill that would increase opportunities for election fraud, trample the First Amendment, further erode confidence in our elections, and forever dilute the votes of legally qualified eligible voters,” Pence wrote, while also reiterating that the 2020 presidential election was “marked by significant voting irregularities.”

Pence’s reference to election fraud comes after former US Attorney General William Barr revealed that federal authorities did not uncover any widespread voter fraud that may have impacted the outcome of the 2020 election, in December 2020. In addition, lawsuits questioning the election results have been rejected by courts across the US.

In his column, Pence also stated that the bill could “deter” election fraud.

“HR 1 mandates the most questionable and abuse-prone election rules nationwide, while banning common sense measures to detect, deter, and prosecute election fraud,” Pence noted.

“Leftists not only want you powerless at the ballot box, they want to silence and censor anyone who would dare to criticize their unconstitutional power grab,” he added.

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Video: Japanese Billionaire Invites Eight People to Join Him on SpaceX Flight to Moon  
by [Mary F.](#)

Yusaku Maezawa is a Japanese billionaire entrepreneur and art collector who launched online fashion retail website Zozotown in 2004. In 2018, Maezawa also founded a custom-fit apparel brand called ZOZO. He is estimated by Forbes to have a net worth of around \$2 billion. In a video released Tuesday morning, Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa revealed that he will invite eight people to join him on SpaceX's private space flight, dubbed dearMoon, to the moon in 2023.

"I have bought all the seats, so it will be a private ride," Maezawa explained.

Back in 2018, Maezawa purchased all seats aboard Elon Musk's SpaceX Starship, a private spaceflight scheduled to take place in 2023 that will make a week-long journey to the moon and back.

The billionaire also encouraged people from "all kinds of backgrounds" to apply to join the mission.

Maezawa, who was revealed at the Starship's first signed passenger in 2018, had previously announced that he would select a group of artists but has since decided to invite a wider audience to apply.

In his Tuesday video, Maezawa said his original idea to invite artists "has since evolved" and the "maybe every single person is [sic] doing something creative could be called an artist."

SpaceX's Starship is a fully reusable, heavy-lift launch vehicle. SpaceX on Wednesday was slated to launch its latest Starship prototype on a test flight near Boca Chica Village in South Texas. The prototype aborted its first launch attempt before liftoff Wednesday afternoon after the vehicle's engines sputtered off, [space.com reported](#). When the Starship reattempted another launch Wednesday evening local time, it ended up exploding after a successful landing. This is not the first time that SpaceX has experienced setbacks with its prototypes. Most recently in December 2020, a rocket produced by the leading company exploded following a test flight.

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Video: Third Upgraded Chinese Type 052D Destroyer Sporting Anti-Stealth Radar Spotted  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The People's Liberation Army Navy is the world's largest, even bigger than the US Navy, and upgraded Chinese shipyards are pumping out several warships each year, helping the PLAN to become an increasingly modern force, capable of challenging adversaries in waters further from Chinese shores.

During recent naval drills, the Chinese military unveiled a third known upgraded Type 052D missile destroyer sporting a radar capable of detecting stealth aircraft, among other improvements.

According to a report by [China National Radio](#) on Monday, the new version of the warship debuted during Yellow Sea drills with seven other warships. Dubbed the Type 052DL, the upgraded destroyer features an extended helicopter flight deck and a new meter wave radar purportedly capable of detecting stealth aircraft. The warship also carries 64 missile launchers loaded with a variety of anti-ship, anti-air, and anti-submarine missiles, making it a potent threat to any stealth jet it might spot.

The new Type 052DL is painted with the hull number 123, making it the third known ship with the new configuration. According to [the Global Times](#), its name is Huainan, named after a city in Anhui Province. The other two known Type 052DLs are the Zibo, which [debuted last July](#), and the Tangshan, which was first [seen in October](#).

The meter wave radar, mounted on the ship's after-mast, has an extremely long range and is able to spot stealth aircraft that would evade shorter-wave radars because they are commonly designed to evade only short-wave radars, by far the most common. [As Sputnik reported](#), the long-wave technology isn't high-tech, but actually rather low-tech: the first radar systems developed in the early 20th century used meter-long radar wavelengths.

The downside to the meter wave radars is that it requires several receivers to effectively triangulate a detected object's precise location. However, the Type 052DLs still retain the Type 346a active electronically scanned array (AESA) radar, commonly called the Chinese AEGIS, and the Type 518 L-band surveillance radar.

The Huainan's extended flight deck will give it the extra room to fly the new Harbin Z-20 helicopter, an advanced multi-role [chopper recently adapted](#) to the narrower confines of naval operations.

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Yemen's Houthis Claim Control Over Majority of Marib, Government's Last Northern Stronghold by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Saudi-led coalition has waged an unrelenting air campaign against the Houthis since 2015 that has nonetheless failed to stop the Houthis' slow accumulation of territory, much less caused its collapse. However, it has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis, according to the UN. The Yemeni Houthi movement has claimed to control most of Marib, a key city in northern Yemen the militant group has attempted to capture for more than a year.

"Most of Marib is now in the hands of the [Houthis]," Hussein al-Ezzi, the Houthis' deputy foreign minister, [told CNN Wednesday](#).

"There are 14 districts that make up Marib, only two are controlled by the [internationally recognized government] including the city center, two others are battlefields and the rest of the districts are under Houthi control," he added.

The city sits on the eastern flank of Houthi territory, about 120 kilometers east of the capital of Sana'a, and is the largest city in northern Yemen still controlled by the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, who was ousted in early 2015 by the Houthi movement. However, it is also the capital of an oil-rich governorate and a key logistics hub for the region.

Amid a renewed offensive last month, government forces supported by the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis rushed into Marib to defend the city; the [Houthis claimed Daesh](#) forces were among them.

The city has been a haven for refugees fleeing the conflict in other areas and its population has swollen far beyond its modest peacetime population of 16,000, and as the Houthis have closed in, there have been concerns about a large exodus of civilians amid an already-disastrous humanitarian situation.

"Ma'rib Governorate already hosts an estimated one million Internally Displaced Persons [IDPs] - the largest IDP population in Yemen according to local authorities - and some live in approximately 125 IDP sites," the United Nations' International Organization for Migration [said on February 27](#).

The [Houthis have said](#) the Marib operation is essential to their push for the Saudi-led coalition to end its blockade of Yemen, which is responsible for greatly exacerbating [the humanitarian crisis](#) by restricting food and medicine imports. More than 100,000 people have died in the conflict, nearly all of them Yemenis, and millions more are threatened with hunger and diseases such as dysentery and cholera, in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, some have challenged the Houthis' claims. Ali Al-Sakani, a former journalist for Al-Masdar News and regular commentator on the activities of the Yemeni government, [said on Wednesday](#) that the Houthis had only captured five of Marib's districts, two of which it has controlled since the start of the conflict in 2015.

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US Flew Unprecedented 75 Spy Plane Missions Over South China Sea in February - Report by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While US President Joe Biden has sought to distance himself from many of the domestic policies of his predecessor, Donald Trump, in the realm of foreign policy he has not strayed far, and in some cases, such as with China, he has adopted an even more bellicose rhetoric. The US flew an unprecedented number of spy plane flights over the South China Sea in February 2021. The South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a think tank connected to the University of Peking, recorded 75 US missions by both manned and unmanned surveillance aircraft.

According to data collected by the think tank, the vast majority of the flights were by P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft - Boeing 737 airliners modified in order to track and destroy surface and subsurface vessels - which flew daily.

Other aircraft seen included the EP-3E Aires and RC-135W Rivet Joint signals intelligence aircraft; RC-135U Combat Sent radar scanning aircraft; E-8C Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS) aircraft used for ground surveillance, battle management and command and control; MQ-4C Triton unmanned spy drones; and P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft.

In addition, the Pentagon is continuing to employ defense [contractors for surveillance](#) missions in the area. SCSPI noted, and other aircraft tracking pages have confirmed, that a CL-604 Bombardier Challenger business jet flown by Tenax Aerospace Corporation flew over the South China Sea as recently as February 25. [SCSPI has described](#) the CL-604's modifications as turning it into a "simplified version" of the Poseidon.

SCSPI noted that February 8 saw the most flights in a single day, with six surveillance craft being spotted. This was also the day before the US Navy held [dual-carrier exercises](#) in the South China Sea with the battle groups from the USS Theodore Roosevelt and USS Nimitz participating.

In all, SCSPI recorded 75 surveillance flights by the US over the South China Sea in February. This is an increase of five missions from the [70 observed in January](#). The think tank noted its records are based on data from automatic dependent surveillance-broadcast (ADS-B), a satellite-based navigation system used by aircraft that might not account for still-more-secretive missions.

The US has [dramatically stepped up](#) its military patrols through the South China Sea in recent years as it inserts itself into a regional dispute over territorial claims on the tiny islands that dot the waterway. China's claims are by far the largest, constituting the majority of the South China Sea, but substantial and overlapping claims have also been made by Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei. Many of these nations have taken measures to [expand and fortify](#) the small islands, including dredging up seafloor to raise reefs above the high tide line. The US State Department rejected most of China's claims over sea lanes in a [July 2020 declaration](#), and the US and its allies continue to perform "[freedom of navigation](#) operations (FONOPS)" through the areas claimed by China and increasingly also by Vietnam. The operations aim to demonstrate disdain for the claims, but in fact they create tense situations in which Chinese ships and aircraft exchange terse demands with their American counterparts, which claim Chinese actions are aggressive.

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Tehran Accuses US of Profiting From 'Blood Trade' by Selling Saudi Coalition Weapons for Yemen War  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Houthis managed to secure most of Marib on Wednesday, the government's last stronghold in northern Yemen, which the militant group said the Saudi-led coalition had rushed Daesh\* fighters into to defend.

In a pointed response to US accusations on Wednesday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry accused Washington of profiting from a "blood trade" by selling weapons to Saudi Arabia for the war in Yemen.

Ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh told reporters Wednesday that the US and its allies "have been reaping [the] benefit[s] from blood trade in Yemen by selling arms to the Saudi-led coalition."

“The Americans [among them] cannot throw baseless accusations at others instead of being accountable for the atrocities,” Khatibzadeh added, [according to PressTV](#). He further noted that as the Saudi-led coalition’s position slowly falls apart, “they still try to disavow responsibility for the atrocities and misdirect the public opinion.”

His comments come a day after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken accused Iran of perpetuating the conflict by supporting the Houthis, which are formally known as Ansarallah.

“Iran’s involvement in Yemen fans the flames of the conflict, threatening greater escalation, miscalculation, and regional instability,” Blinken said in a [Thursday statement](#). “Ansarallah uses Iranian weapons, intelligence, training, and support to conduct attacks threatening civilian targets and infrastructure in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.”

“We will ensure Saudi Arabia and our regional partners have the tools they need to defend themselves, including against threats emanating from Yemen that are carried out with weapons and support from Iran,” he continued, adding the US was “working diligently” to end the conflict. It’s a remarkable reversal of the history of the war in Yemen. As the Houthis swept to power at a head for a mass movement against austerity in 2014 and 2015, Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi fled the country for Riyadh, at which point the Saudis launched a bombing campaign against the Zaidi Shiite group with the stated goal of returning Hadi to power.

The US, a close [partner of Saudi Arabia](#) since the 1940s, has not only sold advanced weapons to the Saudis and other coalition members like the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Morocco, but also provided extensive logistical support for coalition attacks including targeting information and [aerial refueling services](#). In addition, small numbers of US troops were dispatched to the Saudi-Yemeni border, where they [carried out patrols](#) to destroy Houthi missile and artillery sites. More than 100,000 people have died during the war, nearly all of them Yemenis, as the Saudi-led coalition blockaded Yemeni ports and bombed essentially all Yemeni civic infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, thanks to near-total domination of the skies. Only when the Houthis acquired short-range ballistic missiles like the [Scud-based Burkan](#) and so-called “suicide drones” enabling them to [strike deep inside](#) Saudi territory did the tide begin to shift. They also [acquired surface-to-air missiles](#) like the Soviet-era 9K32 Strela-2 shoulder-fired missile and developed their [own self-made missiles](#).

The US has claimed Iran supplied these weapons and is responsible for the reversal of the war - claims both Tehran and the Houthis have rejected. Indeed, many of the weapons used by the Houthis are either crude or decades old and widely proliferated in conflicts across the region. Last month, a new Houthi offensive began against the [city of Marib](#), the last major stronghold of Hadi’s government in northern Yemen. Earlier on Wednesday, they announced they had [captured the majority](#) of the ancient city, which was once capital of the Sabeen Kingdom in Biblical times.

Former US President Donald Trump adamantly defended Washington’s relationship with Riyadh, even shielding Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman from a [US intelligence report](#) finding him responsible for the October 2018 murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, but also [vetoing a Congressional resolution](#) that would have ended US support for the Saudi war effort.

After US President Joe Biden took office in January, he put a freeze on weapons sales before committing to ending outright support for the war, but refused to [put a blanket ban](#) on selling the Saudis weapons of any kind.

"There is a very important distinction between our commitments to not engaged, not support offensive activities and operations in Yemen, including through the provision of offensive weapons, and the legitimate needs of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in terms of its own defense," [Blinken said last week](#), adding the US would ensure "what it provides goes to the defense of the kingdom, not to its ability to prosecute offensive operations."

Khatibzadeh criticized this position on Wednesday, saying that contrary to US claims, "we have not yet witnessed any practical measures aimed at the cessation of the Saudi-led coalition's invasion."

\*Daesh (also known as ISIS/ISIL/IS) is a terrorist organisation outlawed in Russia and many other states.

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Pentagon Took Over 3 Hours to OK Deployment of National Guard to Capitol Riot, DC Commander Reveals  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

As thousands of Trump loyalists stormed the Capitol on January 6 in a bid to halt the certification of the Electoral College results, dozens of DC National Guard troops were forced to remain on standby, despite the disturbing events that were unfolding. The hourslong delay has largely been blamed on failed communication among senior leadership.

The US Department of Defense took more than three hours to approve a deployment of the DC National Guard to the deadly riot at the US Capitol, the commanding general of the DC unit revealed during a Wednesday hearing.

Maj. Gen. William Walker [told senators](#) at a congressional hearing that it took officials at the Pentagon approximately 3 hours and 19 minutes to issue a required approval from then-acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller.

"At 1:49 p.m. I received a frantic call from then-Chief of US Capitol Police, Steven Sund, where he informed me that the security perimeter at the Capitol had been breached by hostile rioters," Walker told the Senate Homeland and Rules committees in a joint hearing.

"Chief Sund, his voice cracking with emotion, indicated that there was a dire emergency on Capitol Hill and requested the immediate assistance of as many Guardsmen as I could muster." Although Walker "immediately" issued the deployment request up the chain of command, he didn't receive the official clearance until approximately 5:08 p.m., at which time thousands of Trump supporters had already trespassed onto the federal grounds and were then at a standoff with US Capitol Police officers who had been stationed at the building.

Awaiting the approval, Walker told lawmakers that he had ordered National Guard troops onto buses so that the unit would be ready to move out at a moment's notice. Once the permission was given, forces arrived at the scene in less than 20 minutes.

"Seconds mattered, minutes mattered," Walker said, adding that had he been given the authorization sooner, the 150-plus troops he deployed "could have made a difference."

"We could have helped extend the perimeter and helped push back the crowd," he stressed.

Walker's testimony also backed up [earlier revelations](#) that he was barred from deploying any forces himself, unless he was first granted explicit approval by then-Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy. The DC commander described the sudden change as "unusual."

Additionally, Walker stated senior leadership, particularly Lt. Gen. Walter Piatt and Lt. Gen. Charles Flynn, were hesitant about deploying the Guard over concerns about how it would look to the American public to send troops to the scene.

"They both said it wouldn't be in their best military advice to advise the secretary of the Army to have uniformed guards members at the Capitol during the election confirmation," Walker recalled, before noting that he was "stunned" and "frustrated" by the response.

Once troops finally arrived at the Capitol, they were able to reestablish a security perimeter at the east side of the building, ultimately helping lawmakers to return to the congressional chamber and resume the certification of the US election results.

Increased Threat of Domestic Terror Likely to Go Into 2022

Wednesday's proceedings also saw testimony be given by Jill Sanborn, the FBI's assistant director of the counterterrorism division, among other officials asked to give their recount of the January 6 events.

Sanborn told lawmakers that investigators have determined that racially-motivated extremists and anti-government extremists would more than likely become the biggest domestic threats the US may face going into 2022.

"Looking forward, we assess the domestic violent extremist threat will continue to pose an elevated threat of violence to the US," Sanborn said. "We expect racially or ethnically motivated and violent extremists and anti-government, anti-authority violent extremists will very likely pose the greatest domestic terrorism threats throughout 2021, and in fact leading into 2022."

The FBI official's remarks came as law enforcement in the nation's capital has been on high alert over concerns that an "unidentified militia group" may attempt to "breach the Capitol" on Thursday.

The US Capitol Police revealed earlier on Wednesday that the agency had obtained information supporting the reports. "We are taking this intelligence seriously," the force said in a [release](#).

It's worth noting that some individuals aligned with the QAnon conspiracy theory movement have seen March 4 as the day that former US President Donald Trump will take back the White House. The theory itself is rooted in the fact that March 4 was previously the date that American presidents were inaugurated until the ratification of the 20th Amendment.

National Guard troops have remained in Washington, DC, since the Capitol unrest in an effort to ensure calm and safety in the region. Local station Fox 5 [previously reported](#) that the Guard may stay until the fall.

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Video: SpaceX's Starship Suddenly Explodes After First Successful Landing  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Previous SpaceX launches of the Starship spacecraft ended in massive explosions after prototypes underwent technical difficulties and ultimately wound up crash-landing.

For a brief moment on Wednesday, aerospace company SpaceX managed to officially record its first successful Starship landing, before the spacecraft unexpectedly exploded right before the watchful gaze of researchers and fans of the project.

The test, which took place at the company's Boca Chica facility in Texas, was the third such model of the Starship effort to be tested by SpaceX. The previous two - [SN8](#) and [SN9](#) - both ended in flames.

Video of the SN10 showed it reach its targeted altitude of 6 miles, before managing to cut off its engines in order to hit the desired apogee. The rocket was then seen in a free fall, an act subsequently followed by the trademark flip maneuver to execute the vertical landing.

For a brief period of time, a success was marked.

But then, just as fans began to cheer on the project's success, disaster struck about 10 minutes later, and the SN10 prototype exploded after touching down. They say that third time's a charm, but not this time, it seems.

Surveillance footage of the eruption shows the Starship model shoot upward, as a fiery cloud envelops the area. The damaged SN10 is seen crashing back down on its side.

It's presently unclear what exactly prompted the explosion; however, speculation suggests the explosion unfolded as a result of a somewhat rough landing and a methane leak. Shortly before SN10's demise, the model was seen slightly leaning on the launch pad.

Netizens, on the hand, have joked online that the sudden incident was SpaceX's way of undertaking a "[rapid unscheduled disassembly](#)." Another remarked that it was just a "[celebratory explosion](#)."

Earlier, SpaceX engineer John Insprucker explained during the company's livestream of the Wednesday test that the launch's main objective was to collect data on computer-controlled movements during the rocket's descent before landing.

The test was initially scheduled to take place earlier in the day, but was ultimately delayed after an onboard computer detected an engine was producing more thrust than was anticipated, ArsTechnica [reported](#).

Starship is intended to be SpaceX's fully reusable Mars rocket system that will one day transport astronauts on future space missions to the Earth's moon and possibly the red planet. SpaceX founder Elon Musk previously indicated that he anticipates the prototype will reach orbit sometime in 2022.

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US Firmly Opposes ICC's Probe Into Palestinian Situation, Says Court Has No 'Authority' Over Matter

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, Fatou Bensouda, a prosecutor with the International Criminal Court, announced that she would be opening an investigation into allegations of war crimes by Israel and Palestinian militant groups in territories occupied by the Israeli government since 1967.

The US State Department responded to the launch of the International Criminal Court's investigation on Wednesday, stating that the Biden administration is "disappointed" by the development.

Ned Price, the spokesperson for the State Department, [told reporters](#) that "we oppose the prosecutor's decision and are disappointed with it," adding that the US will "continue our commitment to Israel and oppose moves that harm Israel."

"The tribunal has no authority on the matter," he added.

Price's response came shortly after the Israel Defense Forces released their [own statement](#) that described the ICC's move as "fundamentally invalid" and "made without authority and on flawed grounds."

Earlier, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [blasted](#) the court and called its investigation "absurd" and "undiluted anti-Semitism in the height of hypocrisy." He vowed that the Israeli state would fight the "injustice" until the "outrageous decision becomes null and void."

However, while Israeli officials have rejected the probe, it has been praised by Palestinian leadership. In fact, the Palestinian Foreign Ministry issued a [statement](#) that noted the probe was "long-awaited," and that it would be "ready to cooperate with and extend all assistance" during proceedings.

The investigation will review alleged crimes committed since June 13, 2014, and is expected to focus on the 2014 Gaza War, the actions taken by the Israeli army during 2018 hostilities along the Gaza border, and the Israeli settlement enterprise. Additionally, the probe is likely to review the back and forth rocket attacks in the area.

Bensouda noted in a [Wednesday release](#) that the investigation would be "conducted independently, impartially, and objectively, without fear or favor."

"In the end, our central concern must be for the victims of crimes, both Palestinian and Israeli, arising from the long cycle of violence and insecurity that has caused deep suffering and despair on all sides," the official stated.

As Bensouda is due to step down from her role as chief prosecutor in June, she will be replaced by British lawyer Karim Khan, who will not necessarily be bound by Bensouda's decision. Khan's standing on the case is unknown.

The ICC decision comes six years after the court initiated a preliminary investigation into Israeli actions in the territories, and only weeks after the [ICC ruled](#) that its jurisdiction included the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.

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Cuomo Vows to 'Fully Cooperate' With NY AG's Review Into Sexual Harassment Allegations Against Him

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D-NY) came under fire for his administration's alleged undercount of COVID-19 nursing home deaths in the Empire State. Now, he is under the microscope after being accused of sexual harassment by at least two former aides. An investigation has since been initiated.

Cuomo on Wednesday issued a televised address regarding the recent developments, indicating that he would be "fully cooperating" with investigators for the duration of the ongoing probe.

"I want New Yorkers to hear from me directly on this: First, I fully support a woman's right to come forward. And I think it should be encouraged in every way," Cuomo [remarked](#). "I now understand I acted in a way that made people feel uncomfortable. It was not intended and I truly, deeply apologize for it."

The state official further stressed he "never touched anyone appropriately," and that he "never knew at the time that I was making anyone feel uncomfortable."

Cuomo later went on to urge the public to "wait for the facts" of the investigation, before stating he had no intentions to resign from his post.

"I'm going to do the job the people in this state elected me to do," he said.

Cuomo's latest remarks came after New York Attorney General Letitia James [announced](#) on Monday that she had received a formal referral to select an investigator to review the sexual harassment allegations.

Allegations against Cuomo first surfaced in December 2020 from former aide Lindsey Boylan, who offered additional details of her experiences with Cuomo in a recent [Medium post](#) that described unwanted kisses and inappropriate remarks about her appearance.

Three days after Boylan's post, new allegations were made by another former aide, Charlotte Bennett. The 25-year-old alleged in a New York Times [article](#) that Cuomo had made inquiries about her sex life, including if she ever had sex with older men. At one point, Bennett noted that Cuomo had reportedly made remarks that he wanted to mentor her.

Cuomo is also facing accusations of unwanted touching and kissing at a 2019 wedding.

It wasn't until Sunday that Cuomo [addressed](#) the allegations. However, the governor largely excused his behavior by saying that his intentions were simply "misinterpreted as an unwanted flirtation."

Any findings related to the case that are unearthed by the attorney general's office are not expected to be made public until after the probe has been officially closed.

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Pentagon Concerned Alleged DPRK Nuclear Activity May Be 'Bargaining Chip' Against US Sanctions

by [Evan Craighead](#)

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director-General Raphael Gossi declared earlier this month that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has violated their United Nations Security Council agreements with the continuation of its nuclear program.

Rear Admiral Michael Studeman, director of intelligence for the US Indo-Pacific Command, revealed to attendees of a virtual technology and security event this week that the Pentagon is looking into reports suggesting that North Korea's recent increase in nuclear activity may be a bargaining tactic to get US President Joe Biden to ease sanctions.

"We have our eye on this. And it is deeply concerning where North Korea wants to go," the US military official said, as reported [by Reuters](#).

The administration is also reviewing the current US-North Korea policy at the moment, Studeman added.

"The continuation of the DPRK's nuclear programme is a clear violation of relevant UN Security Council resolutions and is deeply regrettable," the IAEA director-general [said](#) following a meeting with the agency's board of governors on Monday.

Grossi added the IAEA would enhance its readiness "to play its essential role in verifying North Korea's nuclear programme."

Referring to Grossi's statements, Studeman highlighted "the IAEA board of governors issued a notice that there had been evidence of the Koreans reprocessing perhaps nuclear fuel."

The US military official went on to float that the alleged nuclear program could be an attempt to flex their nuclear capabilities and get Biden to readdress previous sanctions.

"If that is true, then that could put us into a different level of tension with Korea," he said. "This may be the start of something that's designed to influence the Biden administration; it may be the first way of getting the new administration's attention here, where perhaps [North Korea] would use this reprocessing development as a bargaining chip for sanctions relief of some sort."

Olli Heinonen, former IAEA deputy director-general for safeguards, published [an op-ed](#) in December 2020 claiming that satellite imagery of Kangson, a North Korean facility suspected to be a uranium-enrichment plant, appeared to be a more "valuable asset" than previously imagined.

"The available evidence suggests that Kangson is not a uranium enrichment plant, although it is likely still tied to North Korea's uranium enrichment program, just in a different role," he said. "Its characteristics are consistent with a large-scale machine tool workshop suitable for the production and testing of centrifuge components."

Furthermore, a UN report observed by Reuters in February alleged the DPRK developed its ballistic missile and nuclear programs throughout 2020, when US President Donald Trump was in office.

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'Neanderthal Thinking': Biden Rips Republican Governors Who Lifted Mask Mandates - Video by [Evan Craighead](#)

Both Texas Governor Greg Abbott (R) and Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves (R) announced earlier this week that they would be ordering the lifting of state-wide mask mandates due to recent decreases in daily COVID-19 diagnoses and hospitalizations.

Speaking to reporters at the White House on Wednesday, US President Joe Biden spoke about the US government's plans to accelerate its COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan, and responded to questions regarding recent face mask legislation.

"I hope everybody's realized by now - these masks make a difference. We are on the cusp of being able to fundamentally change the nature of this disease because of the way in which we are able to get the vaccines into people's arms," he remarked, reiterating [his plan](#) to enhance production of Johnson & Johnson's single-shot COVID-19 vaccine.

The US president expects to have enough vaccines for every American adult by the end of May.

"The last thing we need is neanderthal thinking," he argued, referring to the recent easing of COVID-19 restrictions and mitigation methods, including state-wide mask mandates.

"Follow the science," the US president urged. "Wash your hands. Hot water. Do it frequently. Wear a mask, and stay socially-distanced."

Texas, Mississippi Move to End Mask Mandates, Despite CDC Director's Warnings

"Hospitalizations are the lowest that they have been in four months," Abbott claimed Tuesday while announcing plans to lift Texas' mask mandate. The governor's executive order, effective March 10, will also allow restaurants in the state to resume accepting patrons at 100% capacity.

"Far more Texans are recovering from COVID than contracting it," he added.

"Too many Texans have been sidelined from employment opportunities. Too many small business owners have struggled to pay their bills. This must end. It is now time to open Texas 100%," Abbott said.

[Critics](#) of his decision have claimed the Texas governor is attempting to appeal to anti-mask residents following the deadly winter storm and state-wide [power outages](#), as health officials previously warned against such a move.

"At this level of cases with variants spreading, we stand to completely lose the hard-earned ground we have gained," Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said on Monday.

Though states are rolling out their vaccine programs "what's really helping to keep safe and protected this point is our viral control practices," the US health official expressed.

Nevertheless, Mississippi's governor also cited low COVID-19 case numbers as reason for effectively lifting the state-wide mask mandate on Wednesday. The lifting is presently set to last until at least March 31.

The Texas Department of Health [has reported](#) 4,781 new novel coronavirus cases and 297 newly reported COVID-19 fatalities. According to [daily data](#) from the Mississippi Department of Health, 380 new COVID-19 cases have been logged and 19 new novel coronavirus-related deaths were reported.

Despite the lifting of the mandates in Texas and Mississippi, local businesses maintain their right to require patrons wear masks.

"If businesses or individuals decide to take additional precautions, they are absolutely within their rights. In fact, it may be smart. But we are not going to continue to use the heavy hand of government when it is no longer justified by the reality we see around us," [Reeves highlighted](#) earlier this week.

Dr. Thomas Dobbs, health director for The Magnolia State, appeared to express opposition to the decision via social media on Tuesday.

"To prevent the spread of COVID transmission and protect patients MSDH guidance still necessitates the use of masks and other measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission in healthcare settings," he tweeted, linking to his departmental website.

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Rumored Capitol Terror Plot Triggers Cancellations as GOP Lawmaker Urges Trump to Address Extremists  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

News of a possible attack on the US Capitol building comes nearly two months after the deadly riot at the same site. The planned January 6 siege was viewed as "domestic terrorism" by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), according to agency director Christopher Wray, who admitted Tuesday that US intelligence on domestic terrorism must improve.

The US House of Representatives decided to rearrange its voting schedule and move remaining votes to Wednesday night after it [was revealed](#) via Joint Intelligence Bulletin (JIB) that "potential domestic violent extremist (DVE) threats" had been made by an "unidentified group" of "militia violent extremists (MVEs)" plotting to "take control of the US Capitol and remove Democratic lawmakers on or about 4 March."

The FBI-US Department of Homeland Security release, dated March 2, noted the alleged MVEs discussed "aspirational plans to persuade thousands to travel to Washington, DC, to participate" in the plot.

Both agencies believe "symbols of government, law enforcement, and ideologically opposed individuals" will be threatened at higher rates moving forward, as many potential extremists "likely are emboldened by the 6 January breach of the US Capitol Building." "MVEs also have allegedly threatened an attack against the US Capitol using explosives to kill as many members of Congress as possible during the upcoming State of the Union address, according to the US Capitol Police Chief," the report highlighted.

While Biden's first State of the Union Address has yet to be scheduled, reports of planned violence during the event emerged late last month.

"We know that members of the militia groups that were present on Jan. 6 have stated their desire that they want to blow up the Capitol and kill as many members as possible, with a direct nexus to the State of the Union," acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman testified before members of a House Appropriations subcommittee.

"Based on that information," she added, it's "prudent that Capitol Police maintain its enhanced security posture until we address those issues going forward."

FBI Director Wray has also emphasized his own agency's need to improve its collection of intelligence on potential domestic terrorists and domestic terror acts.

"We need to get better at collecting, obviously," FBI Director [Wray told](#) members of the US Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday, referring to the agency's collection of data related to domestic terrorism.

He also highlighted that the "criminal behavior" that took place on January 6 "was not an isolated event."

"The problem of domestic terrorism has been metastasizing across the country for a number of years now," Wray told lawmakers, noting that white supremacists make up "the biggest chunk" of the intelligence agency's domestic terrorism portfolio.

Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX) on Wednesday called on former US President Donald Trump to tell the supposed extremists to "stand down," as many of those waging threats have done so in support of the former president, as they claimed.

"This threat is credible and it's real," he told CNN's Jake Tapper Wednesday, referring to US intelligence on the matter. "Because the original inaugural date was March 4, until the 20th Amendment passed, they think this is the true inauguration day and that President Trump should be inaugurated tomorrow. And that is the threat we face right now."

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RPT - Biden Already Breaking Blinken's New Non-Intervention Pledge - Nobel Peace Nominee

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken openly supported overthrowing the Venezuelan government on the very same day as promising no more regime change operations in his first major speech in office, World BEYOND War peace movement Executive Director and Nobel Peace Prize nominee David Swanson told Sputnik.

In the speech on Wednesday, Blinken vowed the United States would avoid interventions and not pursue regime change policies. However, Blinken openly supported overthrowing the Venezuelan government on the very same day as promising the United States would not engage anymore regime change.

"The Biden administration is already breaking those promises!" Swanson said. "We've got a broken promise on Afghanistan ... and backing for a would-be coup in Venezuela."

Blinken acknowledged in the speech that previous US efforts to topple targeted governments by the use of force had failed and also backfired in that they undermined the confidence of the American people in their own government.

"We will incentivize democratic behavior, but we will not promote democracy through costly military interventions or by attempting to overthrow authoritarian regimes by force. We tried these tactics in the past. ...they haven't worked. They have given democracy promotion a bad name and they have lost the confidence of the American people. We will do things differently," Blinken said.

Swanson said Blinken's speech sounded reassuring, but in reality it exposed the reality of the Biden administration's broken promises in addition to humiliating diplomats tasked with implementing and defending US foreign policy.

"This sounds really nice. But making promises after and while already breaking them is insulting to the people who are supposedly in charge of the US democracy. We've got ... a halfway and unclear broken promise on Yemen, no movement on shifting military spending to peaceful projects and a broken promise on the Iran [nuclear]agreement," he said.

Blinken's speech also ignored the continuing reality of the United States' weapons deals with dictatorships, including with Egypt, continuing US warring in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Washington's ongoing refusal to take its troops out of Germany, Swanson noted.

The Biden administration remained committed to the "nomination of numerous war-mongers for high office, continued sanctions against the International Criminal Court, continued courting of the Saudi royal dictator, no prosecution of any pre-Biden war crimes and continued exemption for militarism from climate agreements," Swanson said.

Blinken's speech was a mixture of conflicting positions allowing people to hear what they wanted in it, however contradictory different elements were, Swanson explained.

"Those wanting to hear peace - heard it, I'm sure. Those wanting to hear war - did too, no doubt. Those trying to figure out what's really going on heard both hints at peace and a firm commitment to wildly out of control militarism that guarantees a deadly diversion of resources and a significant risk of major war," he said.

Swanson pointed out that the speech was full of references to national security and the need to renew America's strength while insisting that only the United States could lead the world.

"But there were no threats, no bragging about the hundreds of billions in weapons deals with brutal foreign regimes already done, no promises to 'kill their families,' and not even a God Blessing of the troops at the conclusion," he said.

On Tuesday, Blinken held a telephone conversation with Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido whom the US government continues to recognize as president of Venezuela even though he never won a national election. Blinken is the most senior US official that Guaido has yet spoken to in the Biden administration.

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UPDATE 2 - Trump's Comments Show Huawei CFO Became 'Bargaining Chip' in US-China Trade War – Lawyer

TORONTO, March 3 (Sputnik) – Former President Donald Trump's comments just days after Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou's arrest in Vancouver made her a bargaining chip in the US-China trade war and amounts to an abuse of process, the executive's lawyer said.

In an interview on December 11, 2018, Trump told Reuters that he would intervene in the case brought forward by the Justice Department against Meng if it would be beneficial to US national interests, including striking a trade deal with China favorable to Washington. At the time, the Trump administration had been engaged in negotiations with Beijing concerning a comprehensive trade deal between the two superpowers, the first phase of which was agreed upon in December 2019.

"With that utterance, Ms. Meng became a bargaining chip – a pawn – in this economic contest between these two superpowers," Richard Peck told a British Columbia Supreme Court courtroom on Wednesday. "Those words amount to the opening salvo in this trade war." Peck emphasized that Trump and members of his administration coopted a plot use Meng and her status in China to advance US interests, saying that the former president's "abhorrent" comments amount to an abuse of process.

Peck added that Trump might be the first leader of a state requesting extradition to have, not only publicly commented on the legal proceedings, but indicated their intentions and reasons for the request.

Peck also stressed that the ongoing extradition process is part of a concerted US-led effort to "debilitate, if not destroy" Huawei, a sentiment previously expressed by Huawei and Beijing. In his justification, Meng's legal counsel cited speeches and public comments by top US officials, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former Attorney General Bill Barr. The 49-year-old executive's lawyer said that US and Canadian officials are aware of the damage Trump's comments have caused, citing statements made by then-Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland, who said extradition should be used to only pursue justice immediately after the former president's interview and more recently sitting US President Joe Biden.

During a virtual meeting last month between Biden and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the US president said that "human beings are not bargaining chips." Peck stressed that this statement applied as much to Meng as it did to the two Canadian nationals detained in China on charges of espionage, in an apparent attempt to disassociate the current US policy from Trump.

However, Peck dismissed Biden's possible attempt to rectify the situation, saying his comments in no way repudiate Trump's previous comments and come far "too late."

Peck also cited Trudeau's comments as evidence of a politicized legal process, referencing the Prime Minister's insistence in December 2019 that any future US-China trade deals address the ongoing detention of Meng and the two Canadians.

Meng, the daughter of Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, was arrested on December 1, 2018 at Vancouver International Airport during a layover stop at the request of the US government.

Meng is wanted by US authorities for her alleged role in violating sanctions against Iran. The US Justice Department alleges that Meng committed financial transgressions by misleading multinational financial conglomerate, HSBC, into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014.

In May, British Columbia Supreme Court dismissed the Huawei executive's application to end extradition proceedings against her.

Sino-Canadian relations soured after the arrest of Meng and two Canadian nationals in China - former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor – on charges of espionage and have been further exacerbated by Ottawa's condemnation of Beijing's national security law implemented in Hong Kong and alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang province. Both Beijing and Ottawa view the detention of their nationals as political incidents. Speaking to reporters on Wednesday, China's ambassador in Canada, Cong Peiwu, reiterated calls for Canada to immediately release Meng and mend relations between the two nations. The hearings in this extradition case are expected conclude in mid-May.

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#### Canada's Top Diplomat, Guaido Discuss 'Return to Democracy' in Venezuela - Global Affairs

TORONTO, March 3 (Sputnik) - Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau and Venezuelan opposition figure Juan Guaido discussed in a phone call alleged heavy-handed tactics by President Nicolas Maduro and a return to democracy in the South American country, Global Affairs Canada said.

"During the call, Minister Garneau expressed Canada's serious concern over the unacceptable actions taken by the Maduro regime against democratic forces and civil society and reiterated Canada's commitment to supporting a peaceful return to democracy in Venezuela," Canada's foreign ministry said in a statement on Wednesday.

Garneau reiterated his support for free, fair and transparent elections in Venezuela, according to the statement.

Canada is among a handful of countries that still recognize Guaido, a failed coup leader, as Venezuela's president. The European Union recently revoked its recognition.

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#### SpaceX Successfully Tests Starship SN10 Rocket After 2 Failed Attempts

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - SpaceX successfully tested its Starship SN10 prototype rocket after two recent failed attempts.

The rocket prototype was launched on Wednesday to an altitude of 30,000 feet and then landed back on the ground. However, the rocket exploded about six minutes after landing.

The test launch is deemed successful because the goal was to gather information on how the flaps work to control the rocket when it is horizontal as it is falling back to earth.

SpaceX is developing a space transportation system consisting of a fully reusable Super Heavy launch vehicle and a Starship spacecraft. The system will allow for the delivery of satellites, crews and cargo both to the near-Earth orbit and to the Moon and Mars.

In February, the Starship prototype crashed and burned while attempting to land in the Texas outback, becoming the second time the prototype rocket's test flight has ended in an explosion.

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SpaceX Successfully Tests Starship SN10 Rocket After 2 Failed Attempts

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - SpaceX successfully tested its Starship SN10 prototype rocket after two recent failed attempts.

The rocket prototype was launched on Wednesday to an altitude of 10,000 kilometers and then landed back on the ground. However, the rocket exploded about six minutes after landing.

The test launch is deemed successful because the goal was to gather information on how the flaps work to control the rocket when it is horizontal as it is falling back to earth.

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US Reports 10 Cases of Vaccine Resistant Brazil Coronavirus Variant - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - US health authorities have detected ten cases of the more contagious and vaccine-resistant coronavirus variant from Brazil, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in the agency's latest Morbidity and Mortality weekly report.

"As of February 28, 2021, a total of 10 P.1 cases had been identified in the United States, including the two cases described in this report, followed by one case each in Alaska, Florida, Maryland, and [five cases in] Oklahoma," the report released on Wednesday said.

The Brazil variant is problematic because the immunity acquired by those who recover from the original virus does not prevent re-infection by the variant, Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases (IAID) Director Anthony Fauci said earlier in the day.

Fauci suggested during a press conference by the White House COVID-19 Task Force that an entirely new vaccine may be needed to combat the Brazil variant and that the best strategy at present is to quickly inoculate as many people as possible with existing vaccines.

The CDC report also identified the first case of the Brazil variant in the United States in a patient who was hospitalized for nine days in the state of Minnesota after arriving from Brazil in early January. The victim's traveling companion later tested positive.

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US House Cancels Legislative Business Thursday Due to Potential Militia Attack - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has canceled all legislative business for Thursday after US Capitol Police warned about a potential militia attack on the Capitol grounds, the Washington Post reported.

The report said on Wednesday that the House of Representatives will vote tonight on all votes that were scheduled for Thursday.

The Senate will still convene on Thursday despite the security threat warning. The chamber is currently in the process of considering the House-passed \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package.

Earlier on Wednesday, US Capitol Police said it had obtained intelligence that shows a possible plot to breach the Capitol by a US militia group on Thursday.

The police have made significant security upgrades that include establishing a physical perimeter around the complex and increasing manpower, as well as working with local and federal partners to stop any potential threats, the statement added.

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Facebook Says Will Resume Political Advertisements Starting March 4

WASHINGTON, March 3 - Facebook announced that it plans to resume political and social issue advertisements on its platform beginning March 4.

"Unlike other platforms, we require authorization and transparency not just for political and electoral ads, but also for social issue ads, and our systems do not distinguish between these categories," Facebook said in a release.

Facebook explained in the release it will continue to monitor the situation with respect to advertisements in the coming months and noted that it does not exclude introducing additional changes in its service.

The company introduced a temporary ban on political, social issues and election-related advertisements after the 2020 US presidential election on November 5, saying it seeks to "avoid confusion or abuse following Election Day."

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US Economy Sees Some Higher Wage Pressure, Inflation Still Muted - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - US economic growth continued at a modest pace in the six weeks to mid-February, with some pick-up in wages reported although price pressures were muted, the Federal Reserve's Beige Book economic report said covering economic trends in that time interval.

"Several Districts reported modest wage increases for high-demand positions with many also noting upward pressure on wages to attract and retain employees," the Federal Reserve said.

"Reports on pricing power were mixed, with some retailers and manufacturers affected by input cost increases reporting the ability to pass prices through, while many others were unable to raise prices."

The Beige Book economic report, based on anecdotal information collected by the Federal Reserve's 12 reserve banks, comes just as data on Wednesday showed fewer than expected jobs were created in the private market.

US private sector jobs grew by 117,000 in February, private payrolls surveyor ADP said. Some economists polled by US media said they expected the ADP to report a growth of 200,000 private sector jobs for February.

The Beige Book and ADP reports tempered investor optimism ahead of the nonfarm payrolls report that is due on Friday. Economists are expecting a total public and private sector jobs growth of 180,000 for February, after an expansion of 49,000 in January.

The Federal Reserve explained that higher wages did not translate into a faster pace of inflation as input costs, led by steel and lumber prices, but rose only moderately and retailers did not pass these on to the consumers.

"On balance, wage increases for many districts are expected to persist or to pick up somewhat over the next several months," it said.

The outlook on US consumers, the backbone of the country's economy, also remains murky at best, the Beige Book said, noting only slight improvements in travel and tourism activity due to continued COVID-19 restrictions.

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CEO of US Clinic Chain Gets 15-Years in Jail For Unnecessary Opioid Dosing - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The chief executive of a chain of US pain clinics received a 15-year prison term for a \$150 million fraud involving unnecessary injections for back pain and more than 6 million opioid prescriptions, the Justice Department said.

"In addition to the prison sentence, [Mashiyat] Rashid was also ordered to pay over \$51 million in restitution to Medicare, as well as forfeiture to the United States of property traceable to proceeds of the health care fraud scheme, including over \$11.5 million, commercial real estate, residential real estate, and a Detroit Pistons season ticket membership," the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

From 2008 to 2016, Rashid was the CEO of the Tri-County Wellness Group, where the clinics had a policy to offer patients, some of whom were suffering from legitimate pain and others of whom were drug dealers or opioid addicts, prescriptions of Oxycodone 30 mg, the release said. The clinic forced the patients to submit to unnecessary back injections in exchange for the prescriptions, the release added.

Rashid used proceeds from the fraud to fund private jet flights, and purchase courtside tickets to the National Basketball Association finals, luxury cars, jewelry and real estate, according to the release.

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New US Wind Turbine Power Capacity Sets Record in 2020 - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The US installed more wind turbine capacity in 2020 than in any other year, the Energy Information Administration said in a report.

“Annual wind turbine capacity additions in the United States set a record in 2020, totaling 14.2 gigawatts (GW) and surpassing the previous record of 13.2 GW added in 2012,” the report said on Wednesday.

In both 2019 and 2020, more wind power capacity came on line than any other generating technology, the report added, possibly due to the pending expiration of existing tax credits - a situation that also occurred in 2012.

In December 2020, Congress extended the Production Tax Credit for another year, the report added.

Nationally, 8.4 percent of utility-scale electricity generation in 2020 came from wind turbines, according to the report.

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Trump's Comments Show Huawei CFO Became 'Bargaining Chip' in US-China Trade War - Lawyer

TORONTO, March 3 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump's comments just days after Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou's arrest in Vancouver revealed her to be a bargaining chip in the US-China trade war and amounts to an abuse of process, the executive's lawyer said.

In an interview on December 11, 2018, Trump told Reuters that he would intervene in the case brought forward by the Justice Department against Meng if it would be beneficial to US national interests, including striking a trade deal with China favorable to Washington. At the time, the Trump administration had been engaged in negotiations with Beijing concerning a comprehensive trade deal between the two superpowers, the first phase of which was agreed upon in December 2019.

“With that utterance, Ms. Meng became a bargaining chip - a pawn - in this economic contest between these two superpowers,” Richard Peck told a British Columbia Supreme Court courtroom on Wednesday. “Those words amount to the opening salvo in this trade war.”

Peck emphasized that Trump and members of his administration coopted a plot use Meng and her status in China to advance US interests, saying that the former president's “abhorrent” comments amount to an abuse of process.

Peck added that Trump might be the first leader of a state requesting extradition to have, not only publicly commented on the legal proceedings, but indicated their intentions and reasons for the request.

Peck also stressed that the ongoing extradition process is part of a concerted US-led effort to "debilitate, if not destroy" Huawei, a sentiment previously expressed by Huawei and Beijing. In his justification, Meng's legal counsel cited speeches and public comments by top US officials, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former Attorney General Bill Barr. Meng, the daughter of Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, was arrested on December 1, 2018 at Vancouver International Airport during a layover stop at the request of the US government.

Meng is wanted by US authorities for her alleged role in violating sanctions against Iran. The US Justice Department alleges that Meng committed financial transgressions by misleading multinational financial conglomerate, HSBC, into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014.

In May, the Supreme Court of British Columbia dismissed the Huawei executive's application to end extradition proceedings against her.

The arrest of Meng and two Canadian nationals in China - former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor - brought diplomatic relations to its lowest point in years, which have slightly rebounded amid global efforts to contain the novel coronavirus pandemic. Both Beijing and Ottawa view the detention of their nationals as political incidents.

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US Sentences Romanian National to 45-Month Term for Bank Fraud - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - A 38-year-old Romanian man received a nearly four-year prison sentence on charges of identity theft and bank fraud, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

[Costel] Aparaschivei pled guilty to obtaining counterfeit debit cards bearing stolen account numbers and PINs," the release said on Wednesday.

Aparaschivei, 38, and his co-conspirator, Daniel Gologan, used the counterfeit debit cards in an attempt to withdraw \$144,620 from a credit union in the state of Pennsylvania, the release said.

They succeeded in withdrawing \$66,510, which District Court Judge Robert ordered paid as restitution when handing out a 45 month prison sentence, the release added.

Aparaschivei will be deported to Romania after completing his sentence. Co-conspirator Gologan also pleaded guilty, was sentence to 40 months and ordered deported, according to the release.

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## US Stocks Dip Again on Disappointment Over US Private Payrolls, Nasdaq Leads With 3% Drop

NEW YORK, March 3 (Sputnik) - US stocks fell for a second day in a row on Wednesday, with tech stocks barometer Nasdaq Composite leading with a 3 percent drop after disappointing growth in private sector payrolls last month.

Nasdaq, which includes stocks of tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, closed down 361 points, or 2.7 percent, at 12,997. The drop comes after Tuesday's decline of 1.7 percent for Nasdaq. Following heady gains since the end of October, Nasdaq has had a rough two weeks and a half, losing almost 8 percent since its last strong finish for the week ended February 5.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, closed down 1.3 percent after Tuesday's slide of 0.8 percent.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest gauge of the New York Stock Exchange, fell 0.4 percent, after the 0.5 percent decline in the previous session.

US private sector jobs grew by 117,000 in February, private payrolls surveyor ADP said Wednesday ahead of the government's payroll report due later in the week that would indicate how well the labor market was recovering from the one-year long coronavirus pandemic.

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## US Health Insurers Plan to Contact 2Mln Elderly to Schedule Coronavirus Vaccinations

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - A coalition of leading US health insurance firms plans to contact 2 million unvaccinated elderly Americans, mostly minorities in underserved communities, to help arrange inoculations, White House Coronavirus Coordinator Jeff Zients said.

"Today, more than a dozen of America's leading health insurance providers announced a pilot program to get 2 million of the most vulnerable seniors vaccinated as fast as possible," Zients said during a briefing of the COVID-19 Task Force on Wednesday.

The Vaccine Community Connectors Pilot program targets American's most at risk, vulnerable and underserved communities, such as African-American and Hispanic communities," the coalition said in a separate press release.

As vaccine supplies expand and registrations become available, health insurance providers will identify seniors 65 years of age and older who are vulnerable to the coronavirus and who live in areas where vaccination rates are most inequitable to facilitate vaccine registration and help make vaccination appointments, the coalition said.

The coalition added that it will also work with federal, state and local leaders to deliver vaccines to underserved communities and closely collaborate with other vaccination partners such as pharmacies.

The coalition links two of the nation's biggest groups of health insurers - the American Health Insurance Providers (AHIP) trade association and the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.

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**US to Head Off Arms Races, Reduce Nuclear Weapons Role, Engage Russia, China - White House**

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The United States seeks to avoid a costly arms race, reduce the role of nuclear weapons and engage Russia and China in meaningful arms control negotiations, the White House said in new interim national security guidance.

"We will head off costly arms races and re-establish our credibility as a leader in arms control. That is why we moved quickly to extend the New START Treaty with Russia. Where possible, we will also pursue new arms control arrangements," the guidance released on Wednesday said.

"And we will engage in meaningful dialogue with Russia and China on a range of emerging military technological developments that implicate strategic stability," it added.

While taking steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the national security strategy the US will ensure its strategic deterrent remains safe, secure, and effective. The White House also vowed to retain "strong and credible" deterrence commitments to American allies.

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**US Plans to Continue Targeted Measures Against Myanmar Military - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is going to continue taking targeted measures against military regime in Myanmar, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters.

"Our measures are going to continue to be very tightly targeted at the members of the military," Price said during press briefing on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener said Wednesday was the bloodiest day since the military coup last month as 38 people were killed during protests against the military rule in the country.

Price noted that the United States has enacted targeted policy measures against senior members of the Myanmar military and pointed out that these steps have significant impact. Price also said the United States will act so as not to worsen humanitarian situation in the country.

"We call on all countries to speak with one voice and condemn brutal violence by the Burmese [Myanmar] military against its own people," he said.

Myanmar has been rocked by protests since February 1, when the military overthrew the civilian government alleging it rigged the election and declared a year-long state of emergency.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY  
WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik)

#### US LISTS FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES

- \* The United States will not promote democracy around the world any more through military interventions and forceful regime changes, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.
- \* Blinken characterized the United States' relationship with China as the biggest geopolitical test for Washington in the twenty-first century and one that needs to be addressed from a position of strength.
- \* The United States will use every tool at its disposal to stop other countries to manipulate currencies and steal US intellectual properties, Blinken said.

#### ATTACK ON US AIRBASE IN IRAQ

- \* A spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve confirmed on Wednesday that a rocket attack took place on the Ain Al Asad airbase in Iraq that hosts US troops.
- \* An US civilian contractor died of "a cardiac episode" after the rocket attack on the US airbase in Iraq, Defense Department spokesman John Kirby said.
- \* The United States assesses the impact and works on a precise attribution of the latest rocket attack on its airbase in Iraq, reserving an option of a forceful retaliation, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

#### MYANMAR DEVELOPMENTS

- \* UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener said Wednesday was the bloodiest day since the military coup in Myanmar as 38 people were killed during protests against military rule in the country.
- \* Christine Schraner Burgener warned of the possibility of a full-fledged war in Myanmar amid an increasing number of people killed during protests following the military coup there.
- \* Russia is ready to cooperate with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the settlement of the political crisis in Myanmar, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

#### UNREST IN ARMENIA

- \* The leader of the united opposition of Armenia, Vazgen Manukyan, received a notification about the initiation of a criminal case against him, opposition party Dashnaktsutyun representative Gegham Manukyan said at a rally outside the parliament building on Wednesday.
- \* The Armenian opposition on Wednesday concluded its protest in Yerevan against the country's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

\* Armenian President Armen Sarkissian held a meeting with General Staff Chief Onik Gasparian to discuss the situation in the country, which is currently going through a political crisis, the presidential press service said.

#### RUSSIA'S RESPONSE TO US, EU SANCTIONS

\* The Kremlin views the new US and EU sanctions on Russia as interference in the country's internal affairs, as all the accusations related to opposition figure Alexey Navalny's case are absurd, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

\* Russia is already preparing reciprocal measures that it will introduce in response to the new US sanctions, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, said on Wednesday.

\* The United States is "speaking to the vacuum" when it makes statements about Russia sanctions and signals it sends to Moscow, Zakharova said.

#### UKRAINE

\* US President Joe Biden extended for another year the national emergency with respect to Ukraine with a range of sanctions against Russia, the White House said in a notice on Wednesday.

\* The European Union's Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) agreed on Wednesday to extend sanctions against Russian and Ukrainian individuals and organizations that were first introduced back in 2014, for another six months, a source in the EU told Sputnik.

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#### US Firmly Opposes ICC Probe of Israel - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The United States remain firmly opposed to the International Criminal Court's plans to investigate alleged Israeli mistreatment of the Palestinians and believes that it lacks jurisdiction over the matter, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

"We firmly oppose and are disappointed by the ICC prosecutor's announcement of an investigation into the Palestinian situation. We will continue to uphold our strong commitment to Israel and its security including by opposing actions that seek to target Israel unfairly," Price said during a daily briefing.

ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda announced earlier on Wednesday that she will formally investigate allegations of war crimes in the Palestinian territories. The decision followed a February 5 court ruling that determined ICC's jurisdiction in the case.

"The ICC as we have said has no jurisdiction over this matter. Israel is not a party to the ICC and it has not consented to the court's jurisdiction and we have serious concerns about the ICC's attempts to exercise its jurisdiction over the Israeli personnel," Price said.

He added that the Palestinians don't qualify as a sovereign state and therefore are not qualified "to obtain membership as a state and/or to participate as a state and/or to delegate jurisdiction to the ICC."

Price said that the US administration is reviewing sanctions imposed by former President Donald Trump on Bensouda and her aides.

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#### Biden Warns States Against Relaxing Mask Wearing Regime

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden urged states on Wednesday to continue mandatory masks wearing regimes, warning that relaxing measures could lead to additional thousands of COVID-19-related deaths among Americans.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott on Tuesday said he is rolling back novel coronavirus-related restrictions by lifting a statewide mask mandate and allowing all businesses in the state to reopen. Other US states that have lifted the mask mandate include Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Tennessee.

"I think it is a big mistake," Biden told reporters.

He expressed hope that people realize the importance of mask wearing because it makes a difference. He said the US will have enough resources to vaccinate every US adult by the end of spring. Until then it is necessary to maintain safety measures, such as washing hands, mask wearing and keeping social distancing, he said.

The US is the world leader in both confirmed COVID-19 cases (28.7 million) and deaths (518,265), according to Johns Hopkins University data as of Wednesday afternoon.

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### US Envoy Khalilzad Wrapped Up 3 Days of 'Productive' Talks in Kabul - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - US special envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad conducted productive discussions during his visit to Kabul, State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

Khalilzad held talks in Kabul with top officials in Afghanistan and is expected to meet with Taliban representatives in Qatar this week as the Biden administration mulls delaying the US troop exit beyond the May 1 deadline stipulated in last February's Doha pact. A Taliban negotiator last month said the insurgents will kill any Americans that are still in Afghanistan after the deadline.

"Ambassador Khalilzad and his team wrapped up today three days of productive consultations with government officials in Kabul," Price said.

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### Colombia Gets First of 28Mln Vaccines for Americas From COVAX - PAHO Chief

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The arrival of 117,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine for COVID-19 marked the first distribution in plans by COVAX to supply 28.7 million doses to 36 nations in the Americas by May, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Carissa Etienne said Wednesday.

In COVAX's "First Wave" shipment, 117,000 doses of Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine arrived in El Dorado International Airport in Bogota, PAHO said in a press release.

"These first doses mark the beginning of a new phase of our COVID response," Etienne said in the release.

In the Americas, 36 countries are participating in COVAX, a partnership between the World Health Organization and two international groups - the Gavi vaccine alliance and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), according to PAHO.

COVAX has told participating countries that a total of 28.7 million doses of vaccines would be delivered by May 2021, PAHO said.

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### UPDATE-2 - Canadian Judge Finds 2018 Toronto Van Attack Perpetrator Guilty on All 26 Counts

TORONTO, March 3 (Sputnik) - Alek Minassian, the perpetrator of the Toronto van attack in April 2018, which left ten dead and 16 injured, has been found guilty on all 26 counts of murder and attempted murder, an Ontario Superior Court of Justice judge ruled on Wednesday.

Justice Anne Molloy ruled that the 28-year-old was fully aware of impact of his actions and the attack was reasoned and carefully planned in finding Minassian guilty on all counts. While the facts in the case were never in dispute – Minassian admitted to carrying out the attack through his lawyers – the case rested on whether the former IT-student was criminally responsible for his actions or had a mental disorder absolving him of culpability.

“He had a functioning, rational brain, one that perceived the reality of what he was doing, and knew it was morally wrong by society’s standards, and contrary to everything he had been taught about right and wrong. He then made a choice. He chose to commit the crimes anyway, because it was what he really wanted to do,” Molloy said, justifying her reasoning.

Molloy added that Minassian, admittedly guided by incel ideology – an online subculture of so-called “involuntary celibates,” who are unable to find a romantic or sexual partner and espouse hostile views towards sexually active members of the public, particularly women – wanted to achieve fame and notoriety through the attack, and had been fantasizing about committing such a crime for over a decade.

According to the court ruling, the former IT-student, who was months away from graduation, saw himself as a failure and had no hope for the future, and while he was not suicidal, he did not care if he had died as long as he attained notoriety in the process. Minassian had tried to goad a police officer into shooting him during a standoff in the immediate aftermath of the attack, in a bid to “die by cop,” the court document said.

Psychiatric experts assigned to the case were in agreement that Minassian was on the autism spectrum but was not psychotic or delusional when driving the van. However, the experts were divided in whether the perpetrator was aware of the moral implications of his action, which served as the trigger for a prolonged trial.

The trial was conducted by judge alone, after authorities were unable to find jurors unfamiliar with the events in question, Molloy said.

On April 23, 2018, the then 25-year-old Minassian, drove a van along a sidewalk through one of Toronto’s busiest pedestrian corridors for over a mile, ultimately killing ten and injuring 16.

Following the massacre, Minassian published message on Facebook in which he saluted Elliot Rodger, who killed six and injured 13 in a shooting rampage at the University of California at Santa Barbara four years earlier for similar reasons, and proclaimed that the “incel rebellion” had begun.

Investigators said that Minassian had planned the attack weeks in advance.

Reacting to the verdict, Toronto Mayor John Tory said in a statement that there will never be complete closure for the impacted families or the city itself.

Minassian will be back in court on March 18, when officials consider the next steps and discuss the timetable for sentencing.

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US Considers Russia’s Actions Against Radio Free Europe Unacceptable - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned by what it sees as Russia's continued attempts to impede the work in the country of American-backed Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the State Department's spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

"The United States is deeply concerned by Russia's increasingly repressive efforts to clamp down on the exercise of freedom of expression including by members of the press. In particular, we are concerned by today's denial of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's appeals of fines unjustly imposed under Russia's repressive foreign agent registration laws," Price said during a daily briefing. "This is unacceptable and we will continue to support the presence of independent and international media outlets in Russia."

He denounced the laws as "a further transparent effort to impede the work of RFE/RL outlets."

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**Biden Says US Identifying Responsibility for Attack on Airbase in Iraq**

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The United States continues trying to identify who is responsible for the rocket attack against the airbase in Iraq, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.

Ten rockets were fired last night at the Al Asad airbase with one American civilian contractor dying of "a cardiac episode" during the attack.

"We are following through that right now. We are identifying who is responsible, and we will make judgments," Biden told reporters.

Last week, the US launched airstrikes targeting infrastructure used by Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria. Washington said one militant died and two were wounded in the strikes, which the US says were conducted in retaliation for the February 15 rocket attack on the Erbil Air Base in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran's state-run media reported that the airstrikes in Syria resulted in the death of 17 people.

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On April 24, 2018, the then 25-year-old Minassian, drove a van along a sidewalk through one of Toronto's busiest pedestrian corridors for over a mile, ultimately killing ten and injuring 16. Following the massacre, Minassian published message on Facebook in which he saluted Elliot Rodger, who killed six and injured 13 in a shooting rampage at the University of California at Santa Barbara four years earlier for similar reasons, and proclaimed that the "incel rebellion" had begun.

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**New York Governor Apologizes Over Sexual Harassment Allegations but Refuses to Resign**

NEW YORK, March 3 (Sputnik) - New York Governor Andrew Cuomo apologized on Wednesday to two women colleagues who have accused him of sexual harassment but refused to step down pending an investigation into the matter by the state's attorney-general.

"I never touched anyone inappropriately and I never intended to offend anyone, but if that's how they felt, that's all that matters, and I apologize," Cuomo said. "I apologized several days ago, I apologize today, I will apologize tomorrow and I will apologize the day after."

But he remained steadfast that he will not resign without the outcome of a state probe into the allegations against him.

"I wasn't elected by politicians," Cuomo said. "I was elected by the people of the state of New York. I'm not going to resign. I work for the people of the state of New York. They elected me and I'm going to serve the people of the state of New York."

At least two women who have worked with the governor have accused him of impropriety over the past week. One says he forcibly tried to kiss her while the other accuses him of effectively propositioning her for sex.

New York Attorney-General Letitia James announced on Monday that her office was moving ahead to investigate the matter after the allegations led to calls for an independent probe, his resignation or impeachment. At the age of 63, the governor has been in office for a decade. Aside from the accusations of impropriety, the state attorney general's office is also investigating Cuomo for his handling of New York's coronavirus outbreak, particularly the alleged coverup of the deaths of people who originally contracted the virus in state nursing homes that apparently did not receive due care.

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US Progress Against Pandemic Stalls Amid Spread of More Contagious Variants - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - A 3.5 percent rise in the number of US coronavirus cases in the most recent seven-day period suggests the nation is entering a critical phase in efforts to battle the pandemic, as coronavirus variants with increased transmissibility spread, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walenski said on Wednesday.

"We continue to see troubling signs in the trajectory of the pandemic in the US, with the most recent declines in cases and deaths continuing to show signs of stalling. We knew that this could happen as variants emerged and reached more people and more communities,"

Walenski said during a COVID-19 Task Force briefing.

The CDC director said the most recent seven day average of new cases - 66,000 - represented a 3.5 percent increase from the prior seven days and the latest seven day average for deaths of 2,000 showed a 2.2 percent increase.

She cited the B117 variant that originated in the United Kingdom as a hyper transmissible variant that threatens to hijack efforts to end the pandemic.

Center for Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci noted that the UK variant responds "relatively well," to three approved vaccines. But he added that vaccines are less in effective against variants that emerged in Brazil and South Africa, while evidence suggests the same for new variants that emerged in California and New York states.

The Biden administration has set a goal of vaccinating everyone in the United States by the end of May.

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## Exxon Mobil Says Committed to Low-Carbon Projects Despite Focus on Permian 'Fracking'

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - Exxon Mobil pledged its commitment on Wednesday to lower-carbon projects to meet higher global emission standards while staying focused on environmentally-sensitive but profitable fracking in America's premier shale basin Permian. "We remain committed with plans to position Exxon Mobil as a leader in society's drive for a lower carbon future," company Chairman Darren Woods said at Investor Day 2021. Woods said Exxon Mobil had reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 6 percent under its commitment to the Paris Accord, outperforming the energy sector's average reduction of 2 percent.

While the company would continue making progress on reducing its carbon footprint, it will not take its foot off hydraulic fracturing, or fracking as its popularly known, in the high-yielding Permian basin, he said.

Green groups are vehemently opposed to fracking, which is the process of extracting fossil fuels, like oil and gas, from shale basins by injecting a mixture of water, salt, and thousands of toxic chemicals into the earth.

Environmentalists say the chemicals used are toxic pollutants that have been linked to cancer, mutations, and other adverse impacts on human health, and are destructive to aquatic life and ecosystems.

US President Joe Biden has suspended the issuance of new oil and gas leases on federal land and water areas. He has set a target of halving the US carbon footprint by 2035 and committed to investing \$400 billion over the next decade on "clean energy" projects such as wind, solar and water.

Woods tried to draw a clear distinction between the general criticism against fracking and what Exxon Mobil was doing by highlighting the company's successes in reducing its carbon footprint, particularly in the Permian.

The Permian is a shale oil basin about 250 miles wide and 300 miles long, spanning parts of west Texas and southeastern New Mexico. It includes the highly-prolific Delaware and Midland sub-basins.

"We've reduced flaring intensity in the Permian by 80 percent versus 2018," Woods said, referring to the practice of burning gas that is deemed uneconomical to collect and sell. "We're also reducing greenhouse gas intensity and by 2025, expect it to be around 50 percent lower." As an investment itself, the Permian was among Exxon Mobil's best, and "continues to be one of our highest priority investments that offers unique short-cycle flexibility", he said.

"There are competitive advantages as well to achieving double-digit returns at \$35 per barrel cost, which include improved capital efficiency and higher resource recovery," Woods added. Exxon Mobil widened its holdings in the Permian in 2017, after paying \$5.6 billion in stock to acquire companies owned by Texas' Bass family that control parts of the basin in New Mexico. It remains one of the Permian's more active operators, although the number of rigs it has drilling for oil in the basin are down dramatically to just 8 rigs from 48 in 2019, due to the demand destruction in oil caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Woods said Exxon Mobil's Permian fields were expected to yield the equivalent of 700,000 of oil equivalent barrels per day by 2025, versus a projected 400,000 for 2021.

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#### Biden Extends US National Emergency With Respect to Venezuela - White House

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has extended for one year the US national emergency declared with respect to Venezuela, the White House said on Wednesday. "The situation in Venezuela continues to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States. Therefore, I have determined that it is necessary to continue the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13692 with respect to the situation in Venezuela," Biden said in a statement provided by the White House. The Obama-era executive order maintains sanctions and visa restrictions on several senior Venezuelan intelligence and security officials. In 2018, Venezuela held a presidential election in which incumbent President Nicolas Maduro won. The United States did not recognize the results of the election and Maduro as a legitimate president and introduced a series of sanctions against the Latin American country in large part affecting the oil industry.

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#### Wednesday Marks Bloodiest Day in Myanmar Since Coup as 38 People Killed - UN Special Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 3 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener said Wednesday is the bloodiest day since the military coup in Myanmar as 38 people were killed during protests against the military rule in the country. "Today was the bloodiest day since the coup happened on the first of February. Only today, 38 people died," Schraner Burgener said during a press briefing. "Now, more than 50 people died since the coup started." The special envoy said she showed videos of security forces' crackdown on protesters to experts on weapons, who confirmed that the authorities used live ammunition against unarmed demonstrators. Moreover, Myanmar's authorities have already detained around 1,200 protesters, whose whereabouts are unknown. Schraner Burgener expressed hope that she still could undertake her visit the Southeast Asian country at the soonest convenience, adding that she has "some ideas" she wished to discuss with the military and other stakeholders. The special envoy urged the UN Security Council and the international community to take "very strong" measures to stop the violence and reverse the coup. "I had a discussion with the army, and I warned them that member states and the [UN] Security Council might take huge strong measures," Schraner Burgene said.

"And the answer was, 'We are used to sanctions and we have survived those sanctions in the past,'" she added.

Myanmar has been rocked by protests against the military after it overthrew the government and declared a year-long state of emergency on February 1.

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#### Biden Extends for Another Year Ukraine-Related Sanctions against Russia - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden extended for another year the national emergency with respect to Ukraine with a range of sanctions against Russia, the White House said in a notice published on Wednesday.

"The national emergency declared on March 6, 2014, and the measures adopted on that date, on March 16, 2014, on March 20, 2014, on December 19, 2014, and on September 20, 2018, to deal with that emergency, must continue in effect beyond March 6, 2021. Therefore, in accordance with section 202(d) of the National Emergencies Act (50 U.S.C. 1622(d)), I am continuing for 1 year the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13660," Biden announced.

Executive Order 13660 sanctions any persons for actions that allegedly threaten Ukraine's stability and security.

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#### Facebook Says Removed 5 'Inauthentic' Networks From Iran, Russia, Thailand

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - Facebook said on Wednesday that it removed last month five "inauthentic" networks from Russia, Iran, Thailand and Morocco.

"In February, we removed five networks from Thailand, Iran, Morocco and Russia," Facebook said in a report.

Facebook explained that two Iranian networks primarily targeted people outside of Iran, while three other networks, from Thailand, Morocco and Russia, were focusing on domestic audiences. This includes almost 1,500 Facebook accounts, several hundreds of groups, pages and dozens of Instagram accounts.

Facebook said it has communicated with industry partners, researchers and policymakers on this matter.

The company also said it detected and blocked the attempts of several military-linked network in Myanmar to re-establish their presence on Facebook after an earlier removal.

"These repeat violations over the past few years... led to our broader decision to ban the Myanmar military from Facebook and Instagram, which we shared last week," the report read.

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#### US Senators Re-Introduce Bill to Repeal War Authorization Powers After Syria Airstrikes

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - US Senators Tim Kaine and Todd Young on Wednesday re-introduced their bipartisan bill to repeal the 1991 and 2002 authorization to use military force (AUMF) following President Joe Biden's decision to conduct airstrikes against Iran-back militia forces in eastern Syria last week..

"Last week's airstrikes in Syria show that the Executive Branch, regardless of party, will continue to stretch its war powers," Kaine said in a press release. "Congress has a responsibility to not only vote to authorize new military action, but to repeal old authorizations that are no longer necessary. The 1991 and 2002 AUMFs that underpinned the war against Iraq need to be taken off the books to prevent their future misuse."

Kaine urged Congress to promptly pass the measure and called on the Biden administration to support the legislation.

The senator from Virginia emphasized that the war powers keep the United States in everlasting wars and undermine Iraq's sovereignty.

The repeal of the war powers would not impact ongoing US operations against the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia), the release said.

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#### US Still Assessing Impact, Attribution of Rocket Attack in Iraq - White House

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The United States assesses the impact and works on a precise attribution of the latest rocket attack on its airbase in Iraq, reserving an option of a forceful retaliation, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

Ten rockets were fired last night at the Al Asad airbase with one American civilian contractor dying of "a cardiac episode" during the attack.

"We are still assessing the impact of this latest rocket attack, including determining precise attribution... the President was briefed by his national security team this morning, [and] was, of course, monitoring the details overnight," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

She reminded that the US jets have recently bombed an infrastructure of Iranian-backed militias in neighboring Syria in response to similar incidents in Iraq.

"We responded to recent Iranian-backed attacks on coalition and US forces in a manner that was calculated, proportional and fully covered by legal authorities. That will be our model moving forward. If we assess that further response is warranted we will take action again in a manner and time of our choosing. We reserve this option," Psaki said.

Last week, the US launched airstrikes targeting infrastructure used by Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria. Washington said one militant died and two were wounded in the strikes, which the US says were conducted in retaliation for the February 15 rocket attack on the Erbil Air Base in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran's state-run media reported that the airstrikes in Syria resulted in the death of 17 people.

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Migration From 'Northern Triangle' States to Continue for Foreseeable Future - UN Official

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - An influx of migration from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala is expected to continue for the foreseeable future and humanitarian groups must be prepared to deal with the situation, Deputy High Commissioner for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Kelly Clements, said on Wednesday.

"We can certainly see that there is still going to be movement particularly in this hemisphere and more of it for the foreseeable future," Clements said during a panel discussion with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). "We need to get ready, we need to respond, we need to prepare and we need to do this very much in partnership with many others."

Clements and other officials in the CSIS discussion said asylum-seeking migrants from the so-called Northern Triangle countries are fleeing due to security concerns and for economic reasons, such as agricultural jobs lost because of droughts.

Regional Representative for the Northern Triangle of Corus International, Ralph Merriam, said corruption at institutions in the three Central American countries must also be dealt with at a macro level in order to improve quality of life for people considering migrating.

On Tuesday, President Joe Biden said there is no immigration crisis on the US-Mexico border, adding that his administration will be able to handle the influx of migrants arriving at the southern border.

The latest data from US Customs and Border Protection shows that the number of apprehensions of illegal migrants at the southern border has gradually increased since April 2020, reaching more than 70,000 each month between October to January.

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#### UN Advance Team Arrives in Libya to Monitor Ceasefire - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 3 (Sputnik) - An advanced team of United Nations observers arrived in Libya overnight to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"I can confirm that the UN deployed a small advanced team to Libya. The team arrived overnight," Dujarric said. "The advanced team will... provide the foundation for scalable UN support to the Libyan-led and Libyan-owned ceasefire monitoring mechanism."

Dujarric said the team will also prepare inputs for the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' report requested by the Security Council.

In February, the UN Security Council requested Guterres to swiftly set up and deploy a team to Libya to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire.

On October 23, Libya's warring parties - the Government of National Accord and the Libyan National Army - signed a nationwide ceasefire agreement during the United Nations-facilitated commission talks in Geneva.

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#### Trudeau Announces \$410Mln Investment in Canadian COVID-19, Indigenous Research Projects

TORONTO, March 3 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is investing \$410 million to support COVID-19, sustainable development and Indigenous research projects at universities across the country, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced on Wednesday.

"With C\$518 million [US\$410.29 million] through the Canada Foundation for Innovation we are investing in groundbreaking research. This funding will support over 100 projects and hundreds of researchers," Trudeau told reporters.

The money will go towards projects, including speeding up vaccine production at the CHU de Quebec-Universite Laval, sustainability research at Toronto's Ryerson University and Indigenous studies at the University of Manitoba, the Prime Minister's Office added in a statement.

In total, funding will be distributed to 35 universities, colleges and research institutions, predominantly in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, according to the statement.

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## White House Warns Against Relaxing COVID-19 Rules as States Ease Restrictions - Task Force

WASHINGTON, November 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration doubled down on warnings against easing the coronavirus pandemic restrictions amid decisions by some US states to ease or eliminate rules for masks, public gatherings and other mitigation measures, the White House COVID-19 Task Force said on Wednesday.

"Now is not the time," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said. "The next month or two is really pivotal in terms of how this pandemic goes. As we scale up vaccination we really do need to decrease the amount of virus that is circulating as we're trying to vaccinate all of the public."

While the CDC warnings are not new, they take on an added urgency following Tuesday's announcement by Texas Governor Gregg Abbott to end all restrictions in a bid for a 100 percent reopening of the state economy, the COVID-19 Task Force said.

"We hope that other elected officials who have authority in their domains will in fact listen," COVID-19 Task Force chief Jeff Zients said when asked about Abbott's decision.

But Zients added that additional nationwide restrictions beyond those already imposed were unlikely because the Biden administration had use all available federal authority to impose rules, such as one requiring masks during interstate travel.

In addition to Texas, several states responded to recent declines in coronavirus cases by easing restrictions. They include Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina and Mississippi.

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## Sudan to Become First Country in Region to Start Vaccination Against COVID-19 - UNICEF

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The first phase of Sudan's nationwide vaccination campaign was marked by the delivery of more than 800,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday, UNICEF said in a statement.

"The initial consignment of vaccines received today in Sudan will support the vaccination of health care workers and people above 45 years old with chronic medical conditions, living in areas with high transmission or anticipated high transmission," the release said.

The arrival of vaccines, the release added, becomes the second major delivery after 4.5 metric tons of syringes and safety boxes were delivered by UNICEF on behalf of the COVAX Facility on February 26.

Sudan today has over 28,505 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 1,892 deaths. The first case was registered on March 13, 2020, according to the release.

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#### UN Special Envoy Warns of 'Real War' Unfolding in Myanmar

UNITED NATIONS, March 3 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener warned on Wednesday of the possibility of a full-fledged war in Myanmar amid an increasing number of people killed during protests following the military coup there.

"It's not an internal affair; it takes the stability of the region. We know that ethnic armed organizations are determined not to allow this to continue. They also said that they'd suspend the dialogue with the Tatmadaw [Myanmar military]. If both sides start to use violence, then we have a situation of a real war in Myanmar," Schraner Burgener told reporters.

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#### Blinken Says US Relations With China Biggest Geopolitical Test for US in 21st Century

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday characterized the United States' relationship with China as the biggest geopolitical test for Washington in the twenty-first century and one that needs to be addressed from a position of strength.

In his first major foreign policy speech, Blinken called for revitalizing US alliances and reengaging international institutions to deal with China, which he described as the only nation with capabilities to "seriously challenge" the global order.

"Several countries present us with serious challenges, including Russia, Iran, North Korea. And there are serious crises we have to deal with, including in Yemen, Ethiopia and Burma, but the challenge posed by China is different," he said. "China is the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open

international system, all the rules, values and relationships, that make the world work the way we want it to."

Blinken vowed to make the United States' relationship with China "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be."

The Secretary of State emphasized that "the common denominator is the need to engage China from a position of strength that requires working with allies and partners, not denigrating them, because our combined weight is much harder for China to ignore."

Blinken said such an approach requires engaging in diplomacy and in international organizations given that China has filled in where the United States has pulled back from. "It requires standing up for our values when human rights are abused in Xinjiang or democracy is trampled in Hong Kong, because if we don't China will act with even greater impunity," he added.

Blinken named the United States' relations with China among top eight foreign policy priorities of the Biden administration. The rest are defeating the coronavirus pandemic, rebuilding the global economy, crafting a humane and effective immigration system, revitalizing alliances, tackling the climate crisis, ensuring US technological leadership and supporting democracies around the world.

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Wednesday Marks Bloodiest Day in Myanmar Since Coup as 38 People Killed - UN Special Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 3 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener said Wednesday is the bloodiest day since the military coup in Myanmar as 38 people were killed during protests against military rule in the country.

"Today was the bloodiest day since the coup happened on the first of February. Only today, 38 people died," Schraner Burgener said during a press briefing. "Now, more than 50 people died since the coup started."

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RPT - US Not to Promote Democracy Through Military Interventions, Regime Change - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The United States will not promote democracy around the world any more through military interventions and forceful regime change, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

In his first major speech Blinken laid out eight foreign policy priorities of the Joe Biden administration, including supporting democratic values and practices overseas by peaceful means.

"We will incentivize democratic behavior, but we will not promote democracy through costly military interventions or by attempting to overthrow authoritarian regimes by force," he said. "We tried these tactics in the past. However we'll intentioned, they haven't worked. They have given democracy promotion a bad name and they have lost the confidence of the American people. We will do things differently."

Blinken vowed the United States will use the power of example, encourage others to make key reforms, overturn bad laws, fight corruption and stop unjust practices.

"The question is not if we will support democracies around the world, but how," Blinken said.

Other priorities include defeating coronavirus pandemic, rebuilding the global economy, crafting a humane and effective immigration system, revitalizing alliances, tackling the climate crisis, ensuring the United States' technological leadership and confronting China.

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**US Weekly Crude Stocks Up 21.6Mln Barrels After Texas Storm, Exceeding COVID-19 Peak - EIA**

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - Stockpiles of US oil crude ballooned by nearly 21.6 million barrels last week after a snowstorm forced a shutdown of refineries in the heart of the United States' energy heartland of Texas, causing an inventory pileup even bigger than that seen at the height of last year's coronavirus-related demand destruction, government data showed on Wednesday.

The Energy Information Administration (EIA) reported a crude stock build of 21,563,000 barrels for the week ended February 26. That build was larger than the 19.2 million-barrel one seen during the week to April 10, 2020, when demand for oil cratered amid stiff economic lockdowns prompted by the coronavirus outbreak.

Industry analysts polled by US media had expected a crude stockpile decline of around 1,300,000 barrels, for last week.

EIA data showed the build in crude stocks came as US refineries ran at just 56 percent of operable capacity last week, versus the previous week's 68.6 percent rate. Refinery rates have plummeted since the February 13-17 snowstorm that hit Texas, the biggest US state for oil and gas production, as well as refining.

The data also showed that crude imports rose 1.7 million barrels per day (bpd) last week to reach 6.3 million bpd. Production gained as well by 300,000 bpd to 10 million bpd, adding to supplies, while crude exports were barely changed at 2.35 million bpd.

Inventories of motor gasoline, or petrol and stockpiles of distillates, which include heating oil, also declined, according to the data.

Gasoline inventories fell by 13.6 million barrels versus the industry consensus for a draw of 2.3 million. Distillates stocks fell by 9.7 million against average forecasts for a drop of 3.0 million, as frigid temperatures across the United States sparked extraordinary heating demand.

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US Vows to Stop States Manipulating Currencies, Stealing Intellectual Properties - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The United States will use every tool to stop other countries to manipulate currencies and steal US intellectual properties, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"We will use every tool stop countries stealing our intellectual properties or manipulating currencies," Blinken said in his foreign policy speech at the State Department.

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UN Mission in S. Sudan Will Redeploy Staff to Strengthen Country's Institutions - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 3 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) plans to redeploy personnel and resources to build the capacity of the country's democratic institutions, such as the courts and national police, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General in South Sudan David Shearer said on Wednesday.

"Protection of civilians through our peacekeepers is just one means of providing protection. More important in the long term is to create a protective environment where all citizens benefit from the rule of law," Shearer told the UN Security Council.

"So, we are looking to redeploy staff and resources to build the capacity of important institutions, including the courts, justice system and national police," he said.

Shearer explained that Individual police officers, assigned to serve with the United Nations by their governments, will train and mentor local South Sudanese police.

The UN mission on the ground will also work to make the mobile courts permanent and will help to tackle impunity and provide victims access to justice, Shearer said.

In addition, Shearer said he was prioritizing technical support for the security sector reform process and preparations for elections in 2023. He pointed out that over the next two years, the number of peacekeeping forces will gradually decrease by about seven percent as resources shift to assets to boost the forces' mobility.

South Sudan will in July mark ten years of independence from Sudan. Since 2013, South Sudan has been engulfed in a civil war between the government of President Salva Kiir and the opposition. The conflict killed nearly 400,000 people and displaced more than four million. In September 2018, Kiir signed a peace agreement with rebel leader Riek Machar, followed by the formation of the Transitional Government of National Unity in February last year.

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US Capitol Police Aware of Plot to Breach Building by Militia Group on Thursday

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) – US Capitol Police said on Wednesday they were aware that a militia group is potentially plotting an attack against Congressmen at the building on Thursday and has boosted security at the complex.

"The United States Capitol Police Department is aware of and prepared for any potential threats towards members of Congress or towards the Capitol complex. We have obtained intelligence that shows a possible plot to breach the Capitol by an identified militia group on Thursday, March 4," the police said in a statement.

The police have made significant security upgrades that include establishing a physical perimeter around the complex and increasing manpower, as well as working with local and federal partners to stop any potential threats, the statement added.

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US Designates Mexican National as Drug Trafficker Under 'Kingpin' Act - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The US government has designated Mexican national Juan Manuel Abouzaid El Bayeh, also known as Abouzaid El Bayeh, as a narcotics trafficker under the Kingpin Designation Act, the Department of the Treasury announced in a news release on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Mexican national Juan Manuel Abouzaid El Bayeh as a Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker pursuant to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act," the release said.

El Bayeh was charged with conspiracy to distribute cocaine and methamphetamine, knowing and intending that it will be imported into the United States. The indictment alleges that his activities began around 2012. El Bayeh, who remains a fugitive from the charges, the Treasury Department said.

"OFAC designated El Bayeh for his high-level role in facilitating drug shipments and money laundering for the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG), a violent Mexican drug trafficking organization that is responsible for trafficking a significant proportion of the fentanyl and other deadly drugs that enter the United States," the release said.

El Bayeh was designated today for materially assisting in, providing financial or technological support for or to, or providing goods or services in support of the international narcotics trafficking activities of CJNG, the release added.

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US Contractor Died of 'Cardiac Episode' after Rocket Attack on Base in Iraq - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - An American civilian contractor died of "a cardiac episode" after a rocket attack on a US airbase in Iraq, the Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"A US civilian contractor suffered a cardiac episode while sheltering and sadly passed away shortly after," Kirby said in a statement.

There are no reports of injuries among US servicemembers.

According to the statement, 10 rockets were fired at the air base at Al Asad in Iraq.

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**Canadian Judge Finds 2018 Toronto Van Attack Perpetrator Guilty on All 26 Counts**

TORONTO, March 3 (Sputnik) - Alek Minassian, the perpetrator of the Toronto van attack in April 2018, which left ten dead and 26 injured, has been found guilty on all 26 counts of murder and attempted murder, an Ontario Superior Court of Justice judge ruled on Wednesday.

Justice Anne Molloy ruled that the 28-year-old was fully aware of impact of his actions and the attack was reasoned and carefully planned.

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**B-1 Stealth Bombers Fly Low Altitude Mission Over 3 Baltic States - US Air Force**

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - Two US B-1B Stealth bombers carried out a low altitude mission flying over the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, with Danish, Polish, German and Italian combat fighters, the US Air Forces in Europe said in a report carried by the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS) on Wednesday.

"Two US B-1B Lancers from the 7th Bomb Wing, Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, flew a Bomber Task Force mission in areas including the international airspace of the North and Baltic Seas, March 3, 2021," the report said.

The bombers were accompanied by F-16 jets flown by the air forces of Denmark and Poland and by Baltic Air Policing Eurofighter Typhoons operating from Germany and Italy, the US Air Forces in Europe said. The aircraft also flew at low altitudes over Riga, Latvia; Vilnius, Lithuania; and Tallinn, Estonia, the report added.

"Bomber Task Force missions are intended to demonstrate US commitment to the collective defense of the NATO alliance and are the visible demonstration of the US capability of extended deterrence [and] a testament to the unmatched strength and capability of the NATO alliance," US Air Forces in Europe commander Gen. Jeff Harrington said.

Such operations carried out in cooperation with US allies and partners demonstrated and strengthened their shared commitment to global security and stability, the report said.

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Biden Should Have Second Look at Nord Stream 2, Drop Sanctions Threat - German Minister

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration should have another look at the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and stop threatening it with sanctions, German Minister of State Niels Annen said on Wednesday.

"I really hope, I hope I am not overly optimistic, but I really hope that with the new Biden administration we maybe can find counterparts who are willing to work with us and to take a second look at what is really happening, because we don't believe that Nord Stream 2 is increasing our dependency," Annen said at the CERAWEEK conference.

"I have to insist that energy policy has always been highly political, we know that. But it's also a question of our own sovereignty, and to threaten friends with sanctions is not acceptable and I hope that that message got as well as understood as the message that we are happy to sit down with our friends and talk," he said.

Annen said it was "a bit early" to determine whether the new US administration has embraced a different tone on the use of sanctions against Nord Stream 2.

"We respect and we understand that the United States government is undergoing a very comprehensive review of many of its policies," he said.

But he emphasized that Germany backs the new US administration's stances on climate change and decision to rejoin the Paris climate accord, calling such policies "music in our ears." Annen expressed regret that differences over the Nord Stream 2 project had shaped the European-American relationship. He argued that many of the concerns expressed in Washington are already addressed by existing mechanisms.

"We have more transparency as I mentioned. We have other technical options," he said. "So, I think we are perfectly prepared to address some of the concerns of our friends that we take very seriously."

He noted, for instance that the US has voiced concerns over the project's impact on Ukraine's energy security, but stressed that no country has done more for Ukraine than Germany.

"Not only in terms of energy, but also in all kinds of support to strengthening Ukraine's democracy," he noted. "That includes by the way also a significant input and help in the negotiation of the ongoing gas transit from Russia via Ukraine. And I believe we can think of many ideas, and we are already working on many fields to address the security concerns that are existing."

Nord Stream 2 is a joint venture of Russian energy company Gazprom and five European partners, aimed at the construction of a twin pipeline to deliver Russian gas to Germany beneath the Baltic Sea. The project is largely criticized by Washington, which calls it a threat to the energy security of Europe and Ukraine in a bid to promote its own more expensive LNG instead.

In this regard, the pipeline is a target of US sanctions, which already prompted several companies to quit the construction.

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US Opens Job Office to Help Fossil Fuel Workers Find Clean Energy Jobs - Energy Secretary

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - A newly created jobs office in the US Department of Energy will help oil and natural gas workers find new jobs in emerging industries such as geothermal power production, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said on Wednesday.

"We've already created a jobs office inside of the department of energy. Our fossil energy office is working hand in glove with the jobs office to develop strategies to ensure that we leave no worker behind," Granholm told a virtual seminar sponsored by the IHS Markit research firm.

Granholm cited the development of geothermal energy as one industry that could benefit from expertise of oil and gas workers.

"You already drill," Granholm said. Oil and gas engineers' experience could improve operational efficiencies in geothermal well construction and in reservoir development and management," she said.

The Energy Department is exploring underground energy storage reservoirs as a technology that could dramatically expand the use of geothermal energy production beyond seismically active zones

The Biden administration has embraced a goal of transitioning the United States to an economy with zero carbon emissions by 2050.

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US Added 117,000 Private Sector Jobs in February - ADP Private Payrolls Data

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - US private sector jobs grew by 117,000 in February, private payrolls surveyor ADP said on Wednesday ahead of the government's payroll report due later in the week that would indicate how well the labor market was recovering from the year-long coronavirus pandemic.

"Private sector employment increased by 117,000 jobs from January to February according to the February ADP National Employment Report," a statement from the private payrolls surveyor said.

Economists polled by US media had expected the ADP to report a growth of 200,000 private sector jobs for February.

The data preceded Friday's non-farm payrolls report due from the government that would show employment in both the private and public sectors. Economists polled by media are expecting the government to report a total jobs growth of 180,000 last month, versus 49,000 in January.

The US labor market has struggled to keep jobs recovery on an even keel after a December spike in COVID-19 infections reintroduced stiff restrictions on society and businesses.

ADP acknowledged the constraints imposed by the virus on the jobs sector, saying large companies were increasingly feeling the effects of pandemic, which had also paused job growth in the goods producing sector.

"The labor market continues to post a sluggish recovery across the board," ADP Chief Economist Nela Richardson, said in the statement issued by the private payrolls tracker. "With the pandemic still in the driver's seat, the service sector remains well below its pre-pandemic levels; however, this sector is one that will likely benefit the most over time with reopenings and increased consumer confidence."

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

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