

03/04/21 Thursday

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'Tip of the Iceberg': Hundreds of Fake COVID-19 Vaccines Seized in South Africa, China - Interpol
by [Mary F.](#)

There are several COVID-19 vaccines in the market including ones developed by Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca. The vaccines, based on various types of technology, teach the immune system to recognize and fight SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

The International Criminal Police Organization, commonly known as Interpol, revealed on Thursday that South African and Chinese police have seized hundreds of fake COVID-19 vaccines.

According to the international crime-control investigation, around 400 vials, equivalent to around 2,400 doses of fake vaccines, were discovered at a warehouse in Germiston, outside Johannesburg in South Africa. In addition to the fake vaccine doses, officers also recovered fake masks and arrested two Chinese people and a Zambian national linked to the haul, [The Guardian reported.](#)

"Whilst we welcome this result, this is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to COVID-19 vaccine-related crime," Interpol Secretary General Juergen Stock told the outlet.

During another recent raid on a manufacturing site in China, police seized a large cache of fake vaccines and arrested around 80 suspects connected to the vaccines.

Interpol also revealed this week that in addition to the arrests in South Africa and China, it was also receiving reports of fake vaccine distribution and scam attempts targeting nursing homes and other healthcare facilities.

The organization also warned that no legitimate vaccines are being sold online.

"Any vaccine being advertised on websites or the dark web will not be legitimate, will not have been tested and may be dangerous," the organization cautioned, [The Guardian reported.](#)

The latest seizure comes after Interpol issued a global alert in December 2020 to law enforcement officials in member countries, warning them to prepare for physical and online COVID-19 crime networks.

Earlier this week, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also issued a statement warning people of fraudulent COVID-19 tests, vaccines and treatments.

"Some people and companies are trying to profit from this pandemic by selling unproven and illegally marketed products that make false claims, such as being effective against the coronavirus," [the FDA wrote in a statement.](#)

"These fraudulent products that claim to cure, treat, or prevent COVID-19 haven't been evaluated by the FDA for safety and effectiveness and might be dangerous to you and your family," the statement adds.

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McEnany Slams Biden's 'Neanderthal' Remark, Compares it to Hillary Clinton's 'Deplorables' Comment
by [Mary F.](#)

US President Joe Biden drew criticism from GOP lawmakers this week after he called it a "big mistake" and "Neanderthal thinking" for states like Texas and Mississippi to lift COVID-19 restrictions like mask mandates and begin to operate at full capacity.

On Thursday, Fox News analyst and former White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany slammed President Biden's recent likening of Republican governors to "Neanderthals." While on "Fox & Friends," McEnany compared Biden's recent statement to remarks made by former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton during the 2016 elections, in which she suggested that some Donald Trump supporters were in a "basket of deplorables."

"Simply giving freedoms causes Joe Biden - the great uniter - to call us Neanderthals among other words that his predecessor Hillary Clinton did as well," McEnany said, [Fox News reported](#).

On Tuesday, both Texas Governor Greg Abbott and Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves said they would be lifting their states' mask mandates, just one day after the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [warned](#) that the US could lose its progress in its fight against the pandemic if prevention measures are rolled back as new contagious variants emerge.

"I am really worried about reports that more states are rolling back the exact public health measures we have recommended to protect people from Covid-19," CDC Director Rochelle Walensky cautioned during a Monday White House COVID-19 briefing.

In remarks to reporters on Wednesday, Biden expressed disdain with the two governors' decisions to roll back COVID-19 prevention measures.

"We are on the cusp of being able to fundamentally change the nature of this disease because of the way in which we're able to get vaccines in people's arms," Biden [told reporters](#). "The last thing we need is Neanderthal thinking that, in the meantime, everything's fine, take off your mask, forget it. It still matters."

On Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki defended the president's decision to call the decision of the two GOP governors to remove mask mandates "Neanderthal thinking."

"I think the president, what everybody saw yesterday, was a reflection of his frustration and exasperation, which I think many American people have, that for almost a year now people across the country have sacrificed, at many times they haven't had information they need from the federal government," Psaki told reporters at a briefing, The Hill reported.

In addition, Psaki noted that Biden was not singling out any individuals when he made his comments, and was simply stating that allowing business to operate at full capacity and lifting mask mandates is akin to Neanderthal thinking.

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'Disregard for Human Life': US Doctor Charged with Murder in Five Opioid Deaths
by [Mary F.](#)

In 2017, the US Department of Health and Human Services declared the opioid epidemic a public health emergency. The crisis began after healthcare providers began to increasingly prescribe opioid medications after pharmaceutical companies in the late 1990s reassured the medical community that patients would not become addicted.

A 75-year-old Long Island doctor, George Blatti, was indicted Thursday on five counts of murder in the second degree and 11 counts of reckless endangerment in the first degree after being accused of writing prescriptions for huge quantities of opioids that lead to the deaths of five patients.

The five patients died between 2016 and 2018, included a 31-year-old volunteer firefighter, a 50-year-old woman with acute neck pain and a 44-year-old electrician with back pain, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

According to [ABC News](#), Blatti saw patients in a hotel parking lot, an abandoned Radio Shack and a Dunkin' Donuts shop.

Blatti is also accused of writing prescriptions for opioids like oxycodone, clonazepam and percocet without examining patients or studying their medical histories. In addition, he used cash and a paper paid to prevent using an electronic prescription system that could have shed light on his actions.

Prosecutors also stated that Blatti continued to write opioid prescriptions for patients even after learning that some of his patients had died, and even after some patients themselves urged him to stop feeding their opioid addictions. Pharmacies, insurers and Medicaid also cautioned the doctor about unrestrained opioid prescriptions.

"This doctor's prescription pad was as lethal as any murder weapon," Nassau County District Attorney Madeline Singas said Thursday, the outlet reported.

"We allege that Dr. Blatti showed depraved indifference to human life, total disregarded for the law, his ethical obligations, and the pleas of his patients and their family members when he prescribed massive quantities of dangerous drugs to victims in the throes of addiction, ultimately killing five patients who entrusted him with their care," Singas added, [NBC reported](#).

"In my nearly 30-year career as a prosecutor, I have never seen a case of such outrageous disregard for human life by a physician," he continued.

Blatti was previously arrested in 2018 for charges related to the criminal sale of a prescription for a controlled substance, forgery and reckless endangerment.

The 2019 case is being consolidated with the Thursday case, ABC News reported. After his 2019 arrest, Blatti, who has been practicing medicine since 1976, voluntarily surrendered his medical license. Even though he is not an expert in pain management, he was frequently visited by patients who were eager to gain access to opioids.

During a Thursday arraignment in Nassau County Court, Blatti pleaded not guilty. He will remain in jail under his March 30 court appearance. If convicted, he could face up to 25 years in prison. The new charges against Blatti are New York state's first case of second-degree murder against a doctor. Last month, a doctor in the Rochester area was [charged](#) with manslaughter after being

accused of overprescribing opioids and controlled substances, which led to one patient's opioid death.

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Iran's Zarif Calls for Renegotiating UN Charter to Remove US' 'Abused' Veto Power Amid JCPOA Impasse
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In a bid to reduce tensions, the UK, France and Germany have backed off a condemnatory resolution aimed at Iran's blocking of some International Atomic Energy Agency inspections. Iran's move is in following a December law by the Majlis aimed at forcing the US to return to the 2015 nuclear deal, which no other party left.

In response to Washington's continued attempts to force Iran to renegotiate the 2015 nuclear deal, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has suggested the UN charter be renegotiated as well, including removing the Security Council's veto power.

Zarif blasted the US position on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), saying in a Thursday tweet the deal "cannot be renegotiated - period."

Then, as if to expose the absurdity behind the position, he noted that "if 2021 is not 2015, it's not 1945 either. So let's change UN Charter & remove the veto - so often abused by US."

The US is one of five nations that is both a permanent member of, and holds unilateral veto power over all resolutions by, the UN Security Council, the only part of the UN with the authority to issue binding resolutions to other nations. The other four nations with veto power are the United Kingdom, France, the People's Republic of China, and Russia, the latter two of which were originally given to the Republic of China and to the Soviet Union, respectively, and then passed on to their legal successor states.

All were allied nations at the conclusion of World War II, part of the anti-fascist alliance that defeated Japan, Germany, Italy, and their various allied states in 1945, although China and the USSR soon formed their own communist bloc as the Cold War reignited old rivalries.

Incidentally, all the five nations also constitute the majority of the world's nuclear-armed nations; the others are Pakistan, India, Israel, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The US has [used its veto power](#) to shield it and its allies from international scrutiny, including especially Israel. The US has vetoed 82 UNSC resolutions, but the USSR/Russia has actually vetoed more, at 116 resolutions.

"Let's stop posturing - which we both did 2003-2012 to no avail - & get down to implementing JCPOA - which we both actually signed on to," Zarif then pleaded.

The five permanent UNSC members, plus Germany, the European Union, and Iran, together formed the JCPOA agreement in 2015. While not a binding treaty, the agreement saw the lowering of international sanctions against Iran in exchange for its accepting of strict limits on the quality and quantity of uranium it could refine, which limited it to certain electrical and medical applications only.

In 2018, then-US President Donald Trump claimed Iran had been violating the deal, which he attacked as a bad deal his predecessor, Barack Obama, had foolishly agreed to. Trump unilaterally withdrew from the deal, returning "maximum pressure" US sanctions against Iran's economy and pressuring other powers to do the same. Few did, as they saw no violations by Iran; however, few effectively resisted Washington's moves, either.

In response, Iran began to [reduce its commitments](#) to the deal, increasing the amount of uranium it refined as well as its purity, although both have remained well below that needed to produce a viable nuclear weapon. Zarif has said Tehran is ready to immediately return to the confines of the deal if the US is, but so far US President Joe Biden has been reluctant to make the first move, insisting Iran return to full compliance before he will lower the Trump-era sanctions.

Last month, the EU proposed [hosting informal talks](#) between Iran and the five permanent UNSC members, but Tehran ultimately rejected the offer, saying it was clear the US must be the first actor in patching up the deal.

"America must end its illegal and unilateral sanctions and return to its (deal) commitments. This needs neither negotiations nor resolutions," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh [said at the time](#).

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China's Tianwen-1 Mars Orbiter Sends Back Stunning High-Definition Photos of Red Planet's Surface

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China's space program is gearing up for a big year, not just with its first Martian probe, but also the anticipated construction of a large new space station.

China's first probe dispatched to Mars, Tianwen-1, has sent back its first photos from high above the planet, including a stunning color image of its north pole.

China National Space Administration (CNSA) published three photos on Thursday received from Tianwen-1: two close-in panchromatic images show the planet's surface in high detail. According to [Global Times](#), the high-definition images were taken at an altitude of 330-350 kilometers above the surface and show an incredible amount of detail, down to 0.7 meters. CNSA said the larger crater is about 620 meters wide.

Another photo snapped with a different camera shows Mars' north pole in stunning color. What appear to be cloud swirls are actually ice deposits atop sand dunes buffeted by strong winds.

Tianwen-1's photos come after NASA's surface rover, Perseverance, sent back a video of its descent followed by photos and sound recordings [from the surface](#). The two spacecraft arrived in the Martian system just days apart and were joined by the United Arab [Emirates' Hope orbiter](#), also that country's first.

While Hope will remain in space, Tianwen-1 is expected to drop its own rover down to the surface in late May or early June, Bao Weimin, director of the Committee of Science and Technology under the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, [told CGTN](#)

[Thursday](#). The rover has no name as of yet, but it is expected to operate for about 90 days after touching down.

Tianwen-1's mission includes study of Mars' morphology and geological structure, as well as its magnetic field, ionosphere and atmosphere more generally.

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US Lawmakers Push Biden to Scrap Trump-Era Micro-Nukes, Sea-Launched Nuclear Cruise Missile

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Even before former US President Donald Trump opened a slew of new nuclear weapons programs in 2018, the US was already slated to spend more than \$1.2 trillion on updating its existing warheads and delivery systems over the next several decades.

Democratic lawmakers are set to introduce a bill on Thursday to curb further development of Trump-era nuclear weapons programs, including a sea-launched nuclear cruise missile and a small-yield nuclear warhead.

According to [Defense News](#), which obtained copies of the bills in question ahead of their introduction, Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) and Rep. Joe Courtney (D-CT) will attempt to block funding for research and development of the proposed sea-launched cruise missile-nuclear (SLCM-N).

The Pentagon previously had a nuclear-tipped version of the Tomahawk cruise missile that served much the same role, but it was removed from US Navy ships in the 1990s and formally retired in 2013, the Obama administration saying it found the weapon redundant. Trump revived the concept in 2018, reintroducing it alongside several other weapons proposals in his [Nuclear Posture Review](#).

The lawmakers will argue the SLCM-N only further complicates the mission of missile-armed submarines like the forthcoming Columbia-class, which will already carry 16 nuclear-armed Trident II ballistic missiles each, as well as a host of strike missiles with conventional warheads. "This legislation is a common-sense bill that will stop the hemorrhaging of precious Navy dollars for a wasteful program that Congress barely debated." Courtney told the publication. In January, the Navy's director of [Strategic Systems Programs said](#) that following an analysis of alternatives, development of the SLCM-N was expected to begin in fiscal year 2022, which begins this October.

Push to Ban Low-Yield W76-2 Warhead

Separately, Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA) and Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA) wrote [a letter to Biden](#) on Tuesday urging him to scrap the cruise missile along with the W76-2 low-yield nuclear warhead, another product of Trump's Nuclear Posture Review.

The first W76-2 warheads [entered service in 2019](#) atop Trident II ballistic missiles aboard Ohio-class submarines. The warhead's yield has been considerably reduced from about 90 kilotons on the W76-1 to about 5-7 kilotons on the W76-2, or about half the strength of the

bombs the US dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the only time nuclear weapons have ever been used in warfare.

When the W76-2 was [announced in 2018](#), Democrats immediately attempted to halt its development, but found little traction in a Republican-controlled Congress. The weapon has been heavily criticized as making nuclear war more likely by trying to make its use seem less provocative.

Some of those fears were fanned in June 2019 when the Joint Chiefs of Staff accidentally published an unclassified document describing the Pentagon's [strategy for limited use](#) of nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict.

"Employment of nuclear weapons can radically alter or accelerate the course of a campaign," [the document said](#), which was immediately taken down, but a copy of which the Federation of American Scientists preserved. "A nuclear weapon could be brought into the campaign as a result of perceived failure in a conventional campaign, potential loss of control or regime, or to escalate the conflict to sue for peace on more-favorable terms."

Comprehensive Policy Review

Markey and Khanna further advise Biden in their letter to initiate [a massive overhaul](#) of US nuclear policy in general.

One major policy shift would be adopting a "no first use" policy, which the US has refused to commit to although other nuclear powers, like China and the DPRK, have long adopted such policies. The lawmakers likewise push for Biden to give up the sole nuclear-strike authorization power that Trump accumulated. Another [letter sent last month](#) by dozens of lawmakers focused specifically on this concentration of power.

They also urge Biden to pause the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD), the new silo-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) [intended to replace](#) the half-century-old LGM-30 Minuteman III. Acquisition costs alone are estimated at \$100 billion, with a lifecycle cost upwards of \$260 billion, they note.

Finally, they urge Biden to promptly begin talks with the DPRK [aimed at denuclearization](#) of the Korean Peninsula. After bellicose posturing failed, Trump pursued negotiations with Pyongyang, which then fell apart after he refused to lower sanctions before the DPRK irreversibly destroyed its nuclear program sites. [Biden has criticized](#) Trump's attempted rapprochement with DPRK leader Kim Jong Un, and said he would not meet with Kim without preconditions.

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'QAnon Shaman' Claims His Actions Amid Capitol Riot Were 'Not an Attack', Says He Stopped Vandalism

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Jacob Chansley, infamously known as the so-called "QAnon Shaman," has remained behind bars since he was arrested in early January after participating in the deadly Capitol riot. Most recently, he was transferred to Virginia's Alexandria Detention Center so that jailers could adhere to his dietary restrictions.

In a recent interview for CBS News' "60 Minutes+," Chansley revealed that he does not believe his actions during the January 6 insurrection constituted "an attack" on the US, since he was actually trying to "bring divinity" to the federal government.

The horn-toting, self-avowed shaman told correspondent Laurie Segall that entering the Capitol is the only decision he made that day that he entirely regrets. "I regret entering that building with every fiber of my being," he stressed, adding that he remains loyal to former US President Donald Trump.

"No, they were not, ma'am. My actions were not an attack on this country. That is incorrect. That is inaccurate, entirely," Chansley stated in a Thursday-released excerpt of the interview. "I sang a song and that's a part of shamanism. It's about creating positive vibrations in a sacred chamber."

"I also stopped people from stealing and vandalizing that sacred space, the Senate. I actually stopped someone from stealing muffins out of the break room. I also said a prayer in that sacred chamber because it was my intention to bring divinity, and to bring God back into the Senate," he added.

Chansley also indicated that he only entered the grounds because he believed that he and others "were waved in by police officers."

Although law enforcement officials have been largely praised for their response to the riots, ongoing investigations have revealed that one officer took selfies with rioters, while another went so far as to direct Trump loyalists who stormed the Capitol.

Earlier, the US Capitol Police announced that six of its officers had been suspended with pay, and that another 29 individuals with the force were under investigation as part of the agency's probe into the January 6 events.

When Chansley was asked whether he considered himself a patriot, he told Segall that he sees himself as a "lover" of the US, a "believer in the Constitution," and a "believer in truth in our founding principles."

"I developed a lot of sympathy for Donald Trump because it seemed like the media was picking on him," he went on to explain. "It seemed like the establishment was going after him unnecessarily or unfairly and I had been a victim of that all of my life, whether it be in school or at home."

However, after Chansley acknowledged that he felt loyal to Trump because he "identified with the negative things [the former president] was going through," he stated that he felt "wounded" after Trump failed to issue pardons to supporters who were involved in the siege.

The interview excerpt came one day before a US judge is expected to hear arguments over Chansley's pretrial release.

Prosecutors have argued that Chansley must stay in custody because he is a threat to the public, citing in filings that he wielded a spear as a weapon when confronting officers and left a threatening note to former US Vice President Mike Pence. Chansley's lawyers, however, have stated the spear was more of a shamanic ornament, and that his note to Pence was not intended to be menacing.

At present, Chansley is being held on charges including civil disorder, obstruction of an official proceeding and entering and remaining in a restricted building, among other violations.

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Biden Halted Second Syria Strike After Intel Revealed Woman, Children Were Near Target Site - Report
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Carrying out his administration's first military strikes, US President Joe Biden gave clearance last week for the deployment of seven precision-guided missiles to target facilities in eastern Syria. The attack, which was intended to send a message to Iran, has prompted lawmakers to introduce legislation to rein in Biden's war powers.

New findings indicate that Biden had originally planned to order two different airstrikes in Syria last week, but was ultimately forced to change course after he received last-minute intelligence that civilians were near the area.

According to an exclusive [Thursday report](#) by The Wall Street Journal, Biden called off the second strike about 30 minutes before bombs were due to drop after national security adviser Jake Sullivan informed him a woman and children had made their way to a courtyard near one of the target sites in Syria.

With the newly-obtained intelligence in hand, Biden made the final call to abort the second half of the mission after US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had reportedly recommended striking just the one target.

Prior to the Journal's report, news of a second strike was not previously known.

Senior administration officials told the outlet that the strikes were carried out as a response to the February 15 rocket attack in Erbil, Iraq, that killed a foreign contractor and injured seven Americans, as well as the February 20 rocket strike on Balad Airbase. The Syria strikes were effectively meant to inform Iran that the US would strike back when needed, but that it did not seek to escalate tensions.

A timeline of events provided by the Journal states that a series of meetings were held after the Erbil attack with Austin, Vice President Kamala Harris, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley, and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, along with officials from the White House's National Security Council.

By February 23, the Pentagon finalized a list of response options, with Biden eventually making the final call two days later during an hourlong meeting in the Situation Room with Harris and other top administration officials.

Shortly after the strike was carried out, the US issued a "confidential message" to Iran. Officials did not disclose the contents of that message to the outlet.

"We had a pretty coordinated diplomatic and military plan here," one administration official told the Journal. "We made sure the Iranians knew what our intent was."

The day after the airstrikes, Biden [told reporters](#) that the launch reiterated to Iran that the Middle Eastern country could not "act with impunity," and that Tehran needs to "be careful" with the decisions that it makes moving forward.

In a letter to congressional lawmakers, the president explained that the deployment was also consistent with the US right to self-defense under [Article 51](#) of the United Nations Charter.

However, this stance was promptly rejected by some lawmakers who opted to reintroduce [bipartisan legislation](#) to repeal decades-old authorizations for military force that are often tapped to justify attacks in the Middle East.

As for Iran, it has condemned the airstrikes. Saeed Khatibzadeh, spokesperson for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, [referred](#) to the attack as “aggressive” and one that serves as a “violation of international law.”

Since last week’s strikes, leadership with the US’ Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve [reportedly](#) raised the threat level for US troops, fearing that a response could be imminent.

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Israeli Claims That Iran Committed ‘Environmental Terrorism’ Via Oil Spill Unfounded, Report Details

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Thousands of volunteers and soldiers in Israel recently came together to clear the remnants of an oil spill that saw massive globs of tar wash up along the Israeli state’s Mediterranean coastline. Amid the ongoing cleanup efforts, unsubstantiated claims that Iran deliberately caused the spill have run rampant.

Despite unfounded claims being voiced by Israeli government officials, a new report conducted by the state’s Channel 12 has recently determined that investigators have found no evidence to support allegations that Iran carried out “environmental terrorism” against its longtime foe. Citing the Channel 12 findings, The Times of Israel [reported](#) the state’s Environmental Protection Ministry (EPM) has already handed over its final report on the disaster to government security agencies, which have noted that there is no proof to support that the spill was conducted on purpose.

The investigative report by the Israeli station also indicated that the country’s intelligence agencies were being tapped to dig further into the baseless anti-Iran allegations that have even been voiced by Environmental Protection Minister Gila Gamliel, who initially stated the spill did not appear to be calculated before changing her opinion.

Earlier, The Jerusalem Post [reported](#) that officials with both the Mossad and the Israel Defense Forces were “blindsided” by Gamliel’s accusations, as well as “frustrated by the lack of coordination within the government.”

Although Gamliel has not provided evidence herself, or indicated how she arrived at her conclusion, she told reporters at a Wednesday news conference that Iran committed “environmental terror.”

“Now we have found that Iran doesn’t only carry out terror via nuclear weapons or via attempts to establish a presence on our borders. Iran carries out terrorism by damaging the environment,” she alleged.

On Thursday, Gamliel appeared on Army Radio and reiterated her claims, saying, “to say this isn’t terror is simply inappropriate.” Gamliel claims, however, have also been supported by David Yahalomi, the director-general of the EPM.

Iranian officials have yet to respond to the allegations; however, environmental group Greenpeace has rejected the claims and stated Gamliel’s assertions are “outrageous and factually baseless at this stage.”

“[The claim] is minimizing the well-known and widespread phenomenon of marine pollution by ship oil spills. The minister’s conduct on the matter smells of electioneering and an attempt to score political points over an ecological disaster,” the [statement](#) added.

Globules of tar first began to appear on Israel’s coastline on February 19, after a winter storm pushed the slick to the shore. Estimates suggest some 1,000 tons of tar have reached the coast, causing irreversible damage. Tar has also emerged along parts of Lebanon’s coast. It’s believed the oil may have spilled from the Emerald, a Libyan-owned ship that was transporting oil from Iran to Syria. Iranian oil tankers have increasingly been accused of illegally smuggling oil out of the country after the US withdrew from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and saw strict sanctions imposed, including on its oil sector.

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Hints of the Past - Political Cartoon

The last time that former US President Donald Trump uttered the words “stand down” to supporters, he ended up giving an endorsement of sorts to the Proud Boys, a violent far-right group that was in support of his 2020 reelection campaign. The remark saw Trump widely criticized for failing to explicitly condemn the group.

Federal law enforcement officials in Washington, DC, have remained on high alert after newly-obtained [intelligence](#) recently indicated that an “unidentified militia group” of extremists were planning to “breach the Capitol” on March 4.

March 4 is seen by some followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory movement as the day that Trump will reclaim the White House, since that date previously marked the day American presidents were inaugurated. However, the former Inauguration Day was later changed with the ratification of the 20th Amendment.

With the threat in mind, some members of the Republican Party have taken the opportunity to call on Trump to take a more active role to prevent a second January 6 from unfolding.

Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX) [stressed](#) to CNN’s Jake Tapper that Trump “has a responsibility to tell them to stand down,” seemingly forgetting what happened the [last time](#) the former president made those exact same remarks.

The March 4 intelligence itself came as Jill Sanborn, the FBI’s assistant director of the counterterrorism division, [informed lawmakers](#) on Wednesday that racially-motivated extremists and anti-government extremists would likely be a threat to the US through 2022.

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Saudi-Led Coalition Reportedly Destroys Ballistic Missile Launched Towards Jizan
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier Thursday, the Saudi-led coalition intercepted and destroyed a ballistic missile launched by the Iranian-backed Houthi militia. The earlier strike was targeting the Saudi port city of Jizan. The Saudi coalition recently revealed that it managed to destroy a second ballistic missile that was fired by Houthi militants toward Jizan.

The latest strike came a few hours after reports first emerged that a missile was deployed to the same area. At the time, the Arab Coalition issued a statement indicating that the Royal Saudi Air Force had successfully managed to intercept the projectile.

"The terrorist Houthi militia is purposely escalating the deliberate, hostile, terrorist targeting of civilians and civilian objects using ballistic missiles and bomb-laden drones. These terrorist acts amount to war crimes," the [statement](#) read.

"The coalition will continue to implement all necessary operational procedures to safeguard civilians and civilian objects in accordance with the international humanitarian law."

Even earlier, another attack was carried out toward the city of Khamis Mushait that involved two explosive-laden drones.

Increased attacks in the region came as Yemen's Houthis [claimed control](#) over the majority of Marib, a city that the militant forces have attempt to secure for more than a year. Hussein al-Ezzi, the Houthi deputy foreign minister, told CNN on Wednesday that rebels have managed to take control of 10 of the city's 14 districts.

However, the claim has [been challenged](#) by former Al-Masdar News journalist Ali Al-Sakani, who has stated Houthis have captured just five of the 14 districts.

Marib houses one of Yemen's largest oil infrastructures, and is considered to be a key strategic city.

Since the start of the Yemen crisis, hundreds of thousands of people have died in the conflict as millions more face heightened risks of hunger and diseases such as cholera amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Magnitude 8.0 Earthquake Occurs Off Coast of New Zealand, Triggering Tsunami Warning
by [Evan Craighead](#)

New Zealand experienced two other earthquakes earlier Friday, including an estimated 7.3-magnitude quake that struck near the northeast coast, prompting tsunami advisories for the island country.

The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) of New Zealand published [a memo](#) around 8:45 a.m. local time on Friday announcing an 8.0-magnitude earthquake has prompted additional tsunami warnings.

The [USGS registered](#) the Kermadec Islands earthquake around magnitude 8.1.

The NEMA release urged those near the east coast of the North Island and Great Barrier Island to immediately move to "to the nearest high ground, out of all tsunami evacuation zones, or as far inland as possible."

"This is the third earthquake this morning," New Zealand officials highlighted.

The first earthquake, which occurred around 2:27 a.m. local time on Friday, was estimated to be around magnitude 7.3, while the latter quake registered around magnitude 7.4.

"Hope everyone is ok out there - especially on the East Coast who would have felt the full force of that earthquake," New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said via Instagram Friday morning.

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Texas Governor: Lifting of State Mask Mandate Will Not Change Much - Video
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Responding to reporters' questions Wednesday, US President Joe Biden made loose reference to Texas Governor Greg Abbott's decision to lift the state-wide mask mandate, dubbing such a decision as the product of "neanderthal thinking." As of this article's publication, only around 8% of its 29 million residents have been fully inoculated.

Abbott went on the defensive Thursday and told hosts of "Fox & Friends" that the lifting of the mask mandate - set to begin March 10 - "really wasn't all that much different from where we were before."

"Texans have learned the best practice, and that is to wear a mask," he asserted, emphasizing that the state government will still "strongly recommend that people do wear a mask."

The Texas governor also slammed Biden's [Wednesday remarks](#) as both unpresidential and poorly-timed.

"First, it obviously is not the type of thing that the president should be saying. But, second, he kind of said it on the worst day he could have, because the same day he said that in Texas, the Biden administration was releasing illegal immigrants into our communities who had COVID," Abbott said Thursday, repeating his previous claim that the administration "recklessly" released "hundreds" of COVID-infected immigrants into Texas communities.

Abbott's claims come days after Noticias Telemundo Investiga published [a report](#) on a Brownsville, Texas, COVID-testing site for migrants recently released by US Border Patrol. Some 108 migrants have tested positive for COVID-19 at this facility alone, according to a spokesperson for Brownsville.

Furthermore, the bus stop testing site lacks authority to detain immigrants, no matter their COVID diagnosis.

"The City of Brownsville continues to follow all guidelines provided by the CDC and DSHS for Covid-19. The migrants who test positive at the B-Metro facility are advised of quarantine procedures and are asked to socially distance," Felipe Romero, communications and marketing director for Brownsville, told [NBC News](#).

While political opposition is somewhat expected, Gregg Popovich, head coach of Texas' San Antonio Spurs, has also spoken out against the governor's decision and suggested that it will be harder for businesses to enforce their mask policies without the mandate.

"People that didn't want to wear masks in the first place, how do the businesses get them to wear masks? Well, now they don't have to. So now there will be more infections, one would think," the National Basketball Association coach said earlier this week, as reported by [NBC News](#).

"When all of a sudden we act like it's over with, when all the science tells us the opposite, it's basically you're saying: 'You get infected, you die, it's the way it goes. We got to open up,'" the Spurs coach continued. "That's not the way to do it. This is really ridiculous."

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US Traffic Deaths Spike, Despite Decreased Travel During COVID-19 Pandemic - Study by [Evan Craighead](#)

Prior to 2020, National Safety Council (NSC) data showed that fatal motor-vehicle deaths decreased for three consecutive years, with 39,107 deaths on the road in 2019.

New preliminary [semiannual estimates](#) from the NSC gauge some 42,060 motor-vehicle deaths occurred in 2020, amounting to an 8% uptick from the previous year.

The 2020 estimate comes as the most traffic deaths since 2007, when an estimated 43,945 lost their lives on US roads.

Data broken down by all 50 states and Washington, DC, show that South Dakota and the nation's capital both observed a 33% spike in motor-vehicle deaths for 2020, recording 34 and nine more vehicular fatalities, respectively.

Vermont logged 32%, or 15, more motor-vehicle deaths than it did in 2019.

In addition to breaking a years-long decline in motor-vehicle deaths, 2020 was also the year in which motorists in the US drove 13% fewer miles than 2019.

The mileage decline has been attributed to COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and related mitigation measures putting fewer people on the roads daily.

Ken Kolosh, manager of the NSC's statistics, told NBC Washington "the pandemic appears to be taking our eyes off the ball when it comes to traffic safety."

The NSC's newly-released data comes less than a month after a [130-car pileup](#) in Texas that killed at least six people and injured dozens. [The wreck](#) is believed to have been caused by slick road conditions.

Texas observed a 9%, or 305-person, increase in motor-vehicle deaths for 2020, according to NSC estimates.

"It's kind of terrifying what we're seeing on our roads," Michael Hanson, director of the Minnesota Public Safety Department's Office of Traffic Safety, told the outlet. "We're seeing a huge increase in the amount of risk-taking behavior."

Minnesota also logged a 9% increase in preliminary deaths for 2020 than 2019, amounting to 31 more traffic deaths.

Of course, not all states saw increases in traffic deaths. Hawaii experienced a 20% decline in (or 22 fewer) motor-vehicle deaths and Wyoming observed a 13% decline in (or 19 fewer) traffic deaths.

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'They Still Allow Mein Kampf': Netizens Rip eBay for Removing Dr. Seuss Book Listings
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Dr. Seuss Enterprises (DSE), a company that oversees the famed children's book author's legacy, issued a statement earlier this week announcing it would cease publishing and selling six books, including "And to Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street," because "these books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong."

Those looking to purchase the discontinued Dr. Seuss literature reached a roadblock with eBay after the company recently decided to begin delisting the books.

"eBay is currently sweeping our marketplace to remove these items," a company spokesperson [told the](#) Wall Street Journal on Thursday.

The books impacted by the decision include: "And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street," "If I Ran the Zoo," "McElligot's Pool," "On Beyond Zebra!," "Scrambled Eggs Super!" and "The Cat's Quizzer."

For example, Dr. Seuss' "If I Ran the Zoo" depicts African characters as monkeys and describes Asian characters as "helpers who all wear their eyes at a slant."

Vendors and consumers alike took to Twitter Thursday to call attention to the abrupt decision to pull the books from the marketplace.

This country now has a black market in....Dr. Seuss books.

(People are gaming the new Ebay filtering to sell severely marked-up copies of banned/discontinued Seuss books.) pic.twitter.com/osk6C8ViCz

— Antonio García Martínez (@antoniogm) [March 5, 2021](#)

Many social media users highlighted the fact that other books deemed to be discriminatory and/or extremist, like Nazi Germany leader Adolf Hitler's autobiography "Mein Kampf," were still available for purchase on the website, despite [its policy](#).

Dr. Seuss publisher Random House Children Books noted in a Tuesday statement that DSE's decision came after the books' content underwent a 2020 panel review. The move also comes as Dr. Seuss books like "Horton Hear a Who" and "The Sneetches" are becoming included in anti-racism and diversity curricula for US students.

"Ceasing sales of these books is only part of our commitment and our broader plan to ensure Dr. Seuss Enterprises' catalog represents and supports all communities and families," the DSE statement provided to the [Associated Press](#) read.

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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 - Pentagon Reviewing US Capitol Police Request to Extend National Guard Stay for 2 Months

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is reviewing a request from US Capitol Police to extend the National Guard deployment at the Capitol for two more months, a Pentagon official told Sputnik.

"I can tell you the Department of Defense has received a request for continued support from the US Capitol Police, and is currently reviewing that request," the official said Thursday.

The Capitol Police did not immediately respond to Sputnik for additional details about its request.

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. As of Thursday at noon, there has been no visible threat to the Capitol.

However, the Capitol 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.

Acting US Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said last month that there is intelligence suggesting US militia groups are threatening to attack the US Capitol during President Joe Biden's upcoming State of the Union address. Biden has yet to set a date for his first State of the Union address.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Blinken's Case for Restrained Globalism Unlikely to Become US Policy

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken in his first foreign policy speech clearly made a case for pursuing a restrained form of globalism, although it does not appear to be a genuine shift in US strategy given recent aggressive actions, former security and intelligence officials told Sputnik.

At the US State Department on Wednesday, Blinken delivered his first major address highlighting the administration's foreign policy priorities, top amongst which was supporting democratic values overseas though peaceful means.

CASE FOR LIMITED GLOBALISM

Former President Donald Trump was a huge critic of what he called "globalism," and felt US policy should focus on boosting the homeland.

In his speech Wednesday, Blinken mentioned the word "home" at least nine times and vowed that the United States would not promote democracy through costly military interventions.

"Blinken made a case for restrained form of globalism, citing the importance of recognizing that the condition of others has a major impact on domestic health security and economic welfare. I read his emphasis on achieving influence by setting a good example and avoiding military campaigns linked to regime change as hopeful," former US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy Chas Freeman told Sputnik.

Freeman said the speech was explicitly directed at a domestic audience though with awareness that foreign audiences would hear it too. He said it was also a civics lesson for a public that remains ignorant of the realities of statecraft.

The speech was in part a response to the growing criticism of the Biden administration as "resurrectionist," Freeman added.

He said it sought to restore the sense that foreign policies serve purposes that are important to the public, which has become cynical and skeptical about government intentions and performance.

Freeman said Blinken described US competition with countries like China as a test of democracy to deliver benefits other systems allegedly cannot.

He said the description echoed Blinken's theme of "foreign policy realism and restraint."

RHETORIC VS. REALITY

The Biden administration in recent days publicly voiced support for the efforts of Venezuelan opposition exiles while exchanging attacks with Iranian-backed militias. The White House is also mulling delaying the US withdrawal in Afghanistan.

Freeman said the only way Blinken's speech can achieve credibility is by its words becoming actual, detailed policies, which is something that has yet to occur.

"The implications for Venezuela and Iran will depend on the extent to which Blinken's words become deeds," he said. "One can hope but not be sure that, for both these countries, it may mean dialogue and a helping hand rather than invective and blockade aimed at regime as well as policy change. But it will take time for this to happen, if it ever does. And in both cases, there will be ferocious domestic and foreign opposition for such a shift in policy to overcome."

The administration was unlikely to bite the bullet of initiating such needed but politically demanding policies until it had dealt with more immediate problems, Freeman predicted.

The speech, therefore, was "a holding action politically, deferring domestic political combat till later, when higher priorities, like confirming a cabinet and passing COVID-19 have been achieved," he added.

"I take it as sincere but, as I say, too vague to be reliably translated into policy predictions," he said.

Former CIA station chief and founding member of the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) group Philip Giraldi observed that Blinken had acknowledged the failure of previous administration efforts to spread democracy.

"I am a bit confused by it. It is quite sensible to conclude that US military intervention and/or attempts at regime change have been both unsuccessful and have also 'given democracy promotion a bad name,'" Giraldi, head of the Council for the National Interest, said. "At the same time that Blinken was disavowing previous policies of regime change, he is saying [that] the United States is increasing its footprint in Syria and Afghanistan while also staying in Iraq against the will of that country's parliament."

Blinken also had yet to demonstrate that the Biden administration was turning away from the confrontational policies that previous president Trump had pursued against Venezuela and Iran where the stated intention of the "maximum pressure" economic warfare waged against them was to bring them democracy, Giraldi said.

"If Biden were not doubling down in all those places I would welcome what appears to be a shift in policy, but until that happens it might best be regarded as an attempt to put lipstick on the pig," Giraldi concluded.

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US Offers \$5M In for Information on Suspected Kyrgyz Crime Boss Kolbaev - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - The United States increased to \$5 million a reward for information that would facilitate an arrest of suspected Kyrgyz criminal ringleader Kamchybek Kolbaev and disrupt his transnational network's illegal operations, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a statement.

"Today, the US Department of State announces a reward increase of up to \$5 million for information leading to the arrest and/or conviction of Kamchybek Kolbaev and/or for information leading to the disruption of financial mechanisms of Kolbaev's criminal organization," Price said on Thursday.

Earlier, the reward was \$1 million. On Wednesday, the US Embassy in Bishkek decried a Kyrgyz court's decision to release Kolbaev from prison.

The State Department describes Kolbaev as a leader of a criminal network based in Central Asia and involved in drug trafficking, arms trafficking, human trafficking, extortion and other crimes.

Kolbaev was designated by the US Treasury Department in February 2012 for acting for or on behalf of the Brothers' Circle, a broader transnational criminal organization composed of leaders and members of several Eurasian criminal groups.

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Brothers at Center of Trudeau-Linked Charity Scandal to Reject Canadian Parliament Summons

TORONTO, March 5 (Sputnik) - Craig and Marc Kielburger, whose WE Charity was at the heart of the scandal that has plagued the government of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, will reject a summons from a Canadian parliamentary committee, New Democrat MP Charlie Angus said.

"The lawyer for the Kielburger brothers states they will not accept a legal summons from Parliament to testify," Angus, a member of the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, said via Twitter on Thursday. Angus posted an excerpt of the letter to the Subcommittee, in which a lawyer for the Kielburger brothers said, "We have great respect for Parliamentarians and the important work of the Committee. That said, we advise, with regret, that our clients will not appear before the Committee, whether in answer to a summons or otherwise."

It is unclear if the refusal includes WE Charity Chief Financial Officer Victor Li, who was also asked to appear before the Committee, Angus added.

The representative for the riding of Timmins-James Bay in Northern Ontario said the Kielburgers' "defiance" of a parliamentary investigation is "almost without precedent." Trudeau as well as current and former members of his cabinet incurred heavy criticism last summer after media revealed close ties between the officials' families and the WE Charity, in light of government decision to award the charity a \$670-million sole-source contract to administer a government-sponsored student volunteer program.

The Kielburger brothers told a parliamentary committee earlier last summer that members of the Trudeau family received upwards of \$380,000 in speaking fees, travel expenses and other reimbursements over several years.

Former Finance Minister Bill Morneau, who also faced mounting backlash following his admissions that he accepted expense paid trips and that both of his daughters have relationships with the charity, resigned in August.

There are currently multiple ongoing investigations of Trudeau and his government related to the scandal. The prime minister is presently the subject of a conflict of interest probe by the Canada's Ethics Commissioner into his relationship with the WE Charity – the third during his five years in office.

Concurrently, there were a number of parliamentary investigations concerning the awarding of the multi-billion-dollar government ward to the WE Charity that have been halted after Trudeau shut down Parliament until the end of September.

WE Charity announced in September that it would be winding down its operations in Canada.

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US Review of Capitol Riot Proposes Quick Reaction Force - Draft Report

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - A US congressionally-mandated security review of the January 6 riot at the Capitol recommends the creation of a Quick Reaction Force that can immediately respond to similar emergencies, a draft report revealed.

"Our national capital is... a high-value target for foreign terrorists or domestic extremists, yet it has no dedicated QRF [Quick Reaction Force] for response to crises," the draft report states. "The USCP [US Capitol Police] relies on augmentation from other civilian law enforcement agencies for emergency support but we recommend establishment of a robust, dedicated QRF, not only for the USCP, but to serve the nation's capital writ large."

In addition, the draft report said Congress and the Capitol Police Board should immediately implement policies to better enable crisis decision-making and give the US Capitol Police chief the authority to make important decisions in an emergency, including requesting help from the National Guard.

The draft report also recommends Congress authorize Capitol Police to hire an additional 350 police officers.

In addition, the draft report also recommends Congress to authorize the Army Corps of Engineers to assess long-term improvements to perimeter fencing, security surveillance and sensor systems.

Moreover, the draft report states Capitol Police must immediately improve intelligence gathering and develop daily intelligence briefings that it can distribute to relevant law enforcement partners.

After the January 6 riot, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi directed retired Lt. Gen. Russel Honore to lead a task force that would conduct a non-partisan six-week review of the security situation surrounding the Capitol incident in order to identify areas of improvement.

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US Needs Guam Aegis System to Defend Against China's Air, Sea 360 Degree Threats - Admiral

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States needs a defense system on Guam with 360 degree capability to defend against China's capability to fly aircraft and sail ships around the Mariana Islands with the ability to fire missiles from any direction against US targets, Indo-Pacific Command head Adm. Philip Davidson said.

"[In recent missions] what the Chinese were showing was circumnavigations of Guam and the Marianas by ships and bombers offering a 360 degree threat by cruise missiles," Davidson told an American Enterprise Institute (AEI) podcast on Thursday. "Air and missile defense of Guam is my number one priority."

Speaking from Indo-Pacific Command headquarters in Hawaii, Davidson said he wanted a system like Aegis to conduct persistent 360 degree integrated air and missile defense from the so-called Second Island Chain nations and territories.

"We are not going to let Guam go without a fight. It is critically important. We are going to have to be able to fight for it. Missile defense is critical. ...The THAAD [Terminal High Altitude Area Defense] system there now is designed for a rogue shot from North Korea. A new system would help deter China," he said.

China's armed forces were already deploying increasing numbers of bombers and warships with the capability to circumnavigate US islands and bases across the Pacific and strike at them with missiles from all directions, Davidson added.

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Canada Gov't Lawyer Urges Court to Ignore Geopolitical Winds of Meng Case, Focus on Facts

TORONTO, March 4 (Sputnik) - A British Columbia Supreme Court justice should ignore the geopolitical implications of the extradition process against Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou and focus on the facts, the lawyer representing the Canadian government said.

"The elephant in the room in this case has always been the geopolitical winds that swirl around. Yesterday, my friends tried to bring the elephant into this room. With respect, we urge you to focus on the facts and the law and leave the politics to politicians," Robert Frater told Associate Chief Justice Heather Holmes during a hearing on Thursday.

"We're confident that when you look at the facts and apply the law, you will dismiss this motion," Frater said.

Meng's lawyers have been arguing that former US President Donald Trump's comments just days after Huawei Chief Financial Officer's arrest in Vancouver made her a bargaining chip in the US-China trade war and amount to an abuse of process.

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 the United States. 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.

Frater rejected this line of defense, saying that the basis for staying the proceedings based on allegations of abuse of process never existed, arguing that the assertions of Meng's lawyers do not meet the legal threshold necessary for a stay. The legal counsel for the Canadian government added that if Trump's comments represented a credible threat to Meng's right to a free and fair trial, these concerns should have been raised from the onset and not only after other lines of defense had been rejected.

Previously, the 49-year-old executive's defense team applied to end the extradition proceedings, asserting that the case brought forward against her by the Justice Department violated the double criminality principle. However, Holmes dismissed the application in May, ruling that the double criminality requirement was met.

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 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.

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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Biden Administration Should Keep Selling Key US Weapons Systems to Taiwan - Admiral

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration should push ahead with significant arms sales to Taiwan to enable the island to defend itself against any military threat from China, Indo-Pacific Command head Adm. Philip Davidson said.

"Encouraging Taiwan's increase in capabilities is a very important approach. Consistent US arms sales to Taiwan [are] critically important," Davidson told an American Enterprise Institute podcast on Thursday, speaking from his headquarters in Hawaii.

Continuing US arms sales to Taipei were essential to enable Taiwan to maintain sufficient self defense and deterrent capability to be able to "fight if they are called on," Davidson explained. "I am deeply concerned about the next six years given the numbers of fighters, bombers, ships - the capability change - for the People's Liberation Army," Davidson said.

On Monday, the Indo-Pacific Command delivered to Congress a \$27.3 billion plan to buy new missile defense systems, place radar and missile defense systems on the ground and launch satellites. The proposed build-up was seen as being intended to confront and deter China.

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UNICEF Calling on Myanmar Security Forces to Stop Killing Children as 5 Reported Dead

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is calling on Myanmar's security forces to refrain from violence against children as at least five have been reported killed since protests began in February, the Fund said in a statement.

"UNICEF condemns in the strongest possible terms the use of force against children, including the use of live ammunition, and the arbitrary detention of children, and calls on security forces to immediately refrain from violence and to keep children and young people out of harm's way," the statement said on Thursday.

At least five children and multiple young adults have reportedly been killed, while at least four children have been severely wounded in protests in Myanmar, according to UNICEF.

UNICEF partners estimate that more than 500 children have been arbitrarily detained, many of whom are held incommunicado, without any access to legal aid, the statement said.

On February 1, the Myanmar military overthrew the civilian government, having accused the ruling National League for Democracy party of participating in election fraud, and declared a year-long state of emergency. The military detained President Win Myint along with a number of other senior officials.

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US Adds Myanmar Defense, Home Affairs Ministries to Trade Blacklist - Federal Register

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department has added the Myanmar Defense Ministry, Home Affairs Ministry and the conglomerate companies MEC and MEHL to its trade blacklist, a notice published in the Federal Register revealed.

"In this rule, BIS [Bureau of Industry and Security] is taking additional steps in response to the situation in Burma," the notice said on Thursday. "BIS is adding four entities, including specifically identified aliases, to the Entity List under the destination of Burma: the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Home Affairs, Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL)."

The latest action from the United States comes in response to escalating violence against protesters opposing the military coup in Myanmar, the release said.

MEC and MEHL are owned and operated by the military, which receives revenue from these two companies. The Myanmar ministries and the companies will face export control restrictions that will make it difficult for them to receive US supplies.

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

UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener said that Wednesday was the bloodiest day since the military coup after security forces killed 38 protesters.

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RPT - US Debt to Hit 202% of GDP by 2051 at Current Spending Level - Congressional Budget Office

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US government's debt held by the public is projected to grow to more than 202 percent of annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over the next 30 years to 2051, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) warned in a new report.

"By the end of 2021, federal debt held by the public is projected to equal 102 percent of GDP," the CBO said in the report on Thursday. "Debt would reach 107 percent of GDP (surpassing its historical high) in 2031 and would almost double to 202 percent of GDP by 2051."

At an estimated 10.3 percent of GDP, the annual federal government deficit in 2021 would be the second largest since 1945, exceeded only by the 14.9 percent shortfall recorded in 2020, the CBO said.

"In CBO's projections, [annual] deficits decline as the effects of the 2020–2021 coronavirus pandemic wane. But they remain large by historical standards and begin to increase again during the latter half of the decade. Deficits increase further in subsequent decades, from 5.7 percent of GDP in 2031 to 13.3 percent by 2051," the report said.

A growing debt burden could increase the risk of a fiscal crisis and higher inflation as well as undermine confidence in the US dollar, making it more costly to finance public and private activity in international markets, the report added.

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US Guam Base Plan Will Free 3 Destroyers for Fleet Protection, Operations - Admiral

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - A major US defense system defended by thousands of Marines on the island of Guam will free up at least three Aegis guided missile destroyers for other missions and be crucial to defending the Western Pacific, Indo-Pacific Command head Adm. Philip Davidson said.

"Aegis deployment on Guam will conduct 360 degree defense in the second island chain," Davidson told an American Enterprise Institute (AEI) podcast on Thursday. "The Guam base will free up three DDG Aegis missile system destroyers. ...We need to free up those destroyers so they can move with the naval force they were designed to defend."

The new deployment will include the first new Marine Corps base to be constructed in the Pacific region in more than 70 years and would reassure US allies of Washington's commitment to defend them, Davidson, speaking from Hawaii, said.

"The Guam defense system will allow us to regain the advantage, help us to deter China and help us defend what is ours and facilitate the defense of our allies. ...It will be the first new Marine Corps base in Pacific since 1950 and it will contain 5,000 Marines," Davidson also said. Constructing the expanded Guam base was now "the top priority" for the Indo-Pacific Command, Davidson added.

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US Adds Myanmar Defense, Home Affairs Ministries to Trade Blacklist - Federal Register

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department has added the Myanmar Defense Ministry, Home Affairs Ministry and the conglomerate companies MEC and MEHL to its trade blacklist, a notice published in the Federal Register revealed.

"In this rule, BIS [Bureau of Industry and Security] is taking additional steps in response to the situation in Burma," the notice said on Thursday. "BIS is adding four entities, including specifically identified aliases, to the Entity List under the destination of Burma: the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Home Affairs, Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL)."

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US Stocks Down 3rd Day as Federal Reserve Chair Plays Down US Rebound Expectations

NEW YORK, March 4 (Sputnik) - Wall Street stocks fell for a third day in a row on Thursday after Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell played down expectations for US economic recovery by saying he did not expect the country to achieve maximum employment anytime this year.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest gauge of the New York Stock Exchange, fell 1.1 percent to settle at 30,924. Since its last positive close on Monday, the Dow has lost nearly 2 percent.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, closed down 1.3 percent at 3,771, losing nearly 3.5 percent over the last three sessions.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which includes stocks of tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, settled down 2.1 percent, at 12,723. Nasdaq has led losses on Wall Street lately on concerns that some of the stocks on the index were overvalued. With Thursday's drop, the tech-laden index has lost 6.4 percent over the past three sessions.

Thursday's slump on Wall Street came after Powell said he expected to see improvements in employment over the next few months, though that itself will not be enough for the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates, currently at near zero. Powell's remarks also sent the US bond yields and the dollar, both contrarian trades to stocks, rallying.

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US Debt to Hit 202% of GDP by 2051 at Current Spending Level - Congressional Budget Office

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US government's debt held by the public is projected to grow to more than 20 percent of annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over the next 30 years to 2051, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) warned in a new report.

"By the end of 2021, federal debt held by the public is projected to equal 102 percent of GDP," the CBO said in the report on Thursday. "Debt would reach 107 percent of GDP (surpassing its historical high) in 2031 and would almost double to 202 percent of GDP by 2051."

At an estimated 10.3 percent of GDP, the annual federal government deficit in 2021 would be the second largest since 1945, exceeded only by the 14.9 percent shortfall recorded in 2020, the CBO said.

"In CBO's projections, [annual] deficits decline as the effects of the 2020–2021 coronavirus pandemic wane. But they remain large by historical standards and begin to increase again during the latter half of the decade. Deficits increase further in subsequent decades, from 5.7 percent of GDP in 2031 to 13.3 percent by 2051," the report said.

A growing debt burden could increase the risk of a fiscal crisis and higher inflation as well as undermine confidence in the US dollar, making it more costly to finance public and private activity in international markets, the report added.

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ANALYSIS - Blinken's Case for Restrained Globalism Unlikely to Become US Policy

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken in his first foreign policy speech clearly made a case for pursuing a restrained form of globalism, although it does not appear to be a genuine shift in US strategy given recent aggressive actions, former security and intelligence officials told Sputnik.

At the US State Department on Wednesday, Blinken delivered his first major address highlighting the administration's foreign policy priorities, top amongst which was supporting democratic values overseas through peaceful means.

CASE FOR LIMITED GLOBALISM

Former President Donald Trump was a huge critic of what he called "globalism," and felt US policy should focus on boosting the homeland.

In his speech Wednesday, Blinken mentioned the word "home" at least nine times and vowed that the United States would not promote democracy through costly military interventions.

"Blinken made a case for restrained form of globalism, citing the importance of recognizing that the condition of others has a major impact on domestic health security and economic welfare. I read his emphasis on achieving influence by setting a good example and avoiding military campaigns linked to regime change as hopeful," former US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy Chas Freeman told Sputnik.

Freeman said the speech was explicitly directed at a domestic audience though with awareness that foreign audiences would hear it too. He said it was also a civics lesson for a public that remains ignorant of the realities of statecraft.

The speech was in part a response to the growing criticism of the Biden administration as "resurrectionist," Freeman added.

He said it sought to restore the sense that foreign policies serve purposes that are important to the public, which has become cynical and skeptical about government intentions and performance.

Freeman said Blinken described US competition with countries like China as a test of democracy to deliver benefits other systems allegedly cannot.

He said the description echoed Blinken's theme of "foreign policy realism and restraint."

RHETORIC VS. REALITY

The Biden administration in recent days publicly voiced support for the efforts of Venezuelan opposition exiles while exchanging attacks with Iranian-backed militias. The White House is also mulling delaying the US withdrawal in Afghanistan.

Freeman said the only way Blinken's speech can achieve credibility is by its words becoming actual, detailed policies, which is something that has yet to occur.

"The implications for Venezuela and Iran will depend on the extent to which Blinken's words become deeds," he said. "One can hope but not be sure that, for both these countries, it may mean dialogue and a helping hand rather than invective and blockade aimed at regime as well as policy change. But it will take time for this to happen, if it ever does. And in both cases, there will be ferocious domestic and foreign opposition for such a shift in policy to overcome."

The administration was unlikely to bite the bullet of initiating such needed but politically demanding policies until it had dealt with more immediate problems, Freeman predicted.

The speech, therefore, was "a holding action politically, deferring domestic political combat till later, when higher priorities, like confirming a cabinet and passing COVID-19 have been achieved," he added.

"I take it as sincere but, as I say, too vague to be reliably translated into policy predictions," he said.

Former CIA station chief and founding member of the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) group Philip Giraldi observed that Blinken had acknowledged the failure of previous administration efforts to spread democracy.

"I am a bit confused by it. It is quite sensible to conclude that US military intervention and/or attempts at regime change have been both unsuccessful and have also 'given democracy promotion a bad name,'" Giraldi, head of the Council for the National Interest, said. "At the same time that Blinken was disavowing previous policies of regime change, he is saying [that] the United States is increasing its footprint in Syria and Afghanistan while also staying in Iraq against the will of that country's parliament."

Blinken also had yet to demonstrate that the Biden administration was turning away from the confrontational policies that previous president Trump had pursued against Venezuela and Iran where the stated intention of the "maximum pressure" economic warfare waged against them was to bring them democracy, Giraldi said.

"If Biden were not doubling down in all those places I would welcome what appears to be a shift in policy, but until that happens it might best be regarded as an attempt to put lipstick on

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) -

UN SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA

* The Western countries are trying to strip the Syrian government of its rights in the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

* US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the UN Security Council that Washington remained committed to holding accountable all those responsible for using chemical weapons in Syria.

US CAPITOL SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS

* The US Defense Department is reviewing a request from the Capitol Police to extend the National Guard deployment at the Capitol for two more months, a Pentagon official told Sputnik on Thursday.

* There are no signs of looming disturbances in the vicinity of the US Capitol afternoon despite a police warning that a US militia may attempt to attack the seat of Congress, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene.

OIL MARKETS

* The situation on the global oil market has undoubtedly improved in the last two months, while OPEC+ states have shown a high level of compliance with the oil production cuts, Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman said on Thursday.

* Russia has always complied with OPEC+ deal in accordance with its obligations and compliance was above 100 percent in February, Energy Minister Alexander Novak said.

* The rally of oil prices on the heels of the OPEC+ decision not to increase production proves market optimism and recovery, Novak said.

NAVALNY CASE

* The Russian Federal Penitentiary Service told Sputnik on Thursday that it would not disclose the exact location where opposition figure Alexey Navalny was serving his sentence, handed down in the Yves Rocher fraud case, in compliance with the law on personal data.

* UN special rapporteurs groundlessly accused Russia of involvement in the "poisoning" of blogger Alexey Navalny as no evidence of this has been presented, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* Moscow's response to the latest anti-Russian EU sanctions will be proportionate, Zakharova said.

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US to Take 'Additional Action' on Myanmar After Latest Violence - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States will take more actions against Myanmar following the latest violence that killed 24 protesters, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We are deeply saddened by reports that security forces killed as many as 24 people yesterday, March 3. We strongly condemn the use of violence by Burmese security forces against the Burmese people including peaceful protesters, journalists and civil society," Price said. "We will continue as I said to work with the international community to take meaningful action against those responsible. There will be additional action on the part of the United States."

Price also stressed that Washington continues to call on Myanmar's military to exercise maximum restraint.

Price also said that Washington is aware of the reports that the military has charged additional journalists with crimes, and is concerned about increasing attacks and arrests of journalists.

"We call on the military to immediately [release] these individuals and cease their intimidation and harassment of the media and others who are unjustly detained for doing nothing more than their job, for doing nothing more than exercising their universal rights," he said. "We will continue and expand our efforts to promote accountability for the military's actions including the detention of these journalists and heinous violence that we've seen in Burma in recent days."

On Sunday, thousands of people took to the streets in multiple cities across Myanmar to protest the military coup that took place early last month. Tensions appear to be rising as protesters and law enforcement clashed during the protests resulting in an unspecified number of dead.

On February 1, Myanmar's military overthrew the government and declared a year-long state of emergency. The military detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other senior officials having accused them for election fraud.

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US Urges Eritrean Forces to Promptly Leave Ethiopia's Tigray - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States urged for a swift withdrawal of Eritrean forces from the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in a statement on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the UN Security Council, presided over by the United States in March, gathered behind closed doors to address the humanitarian crisis in the embattled region.

"We urge the Ethiopian government to support an immediate end to the fighting in Tigray," Thomas-Greenfield said. "To that end, the prompt withdrawal of Eritrean forces and Amhara regional forces from Tigray are essential steps."

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also called for the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray, according to his spokesperson Stephane Dujarric.

The US envoy appealed to the broader region to cooperate fast to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. She said that for its part, Washington will work bilaterally and multilaterally to secure an end to violence.

"We are committed to holding perpetrators of abuses and violations on all sides to account, and we are committed to addressing and assisting with the humanitarian and the human rights crisis," Thomas-Greenfield added.

Fighting in the province of Tigray broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party - Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) - of attacking a regional military base to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia. Roughly 40,000 Ethiopian citizens have fled to Sudan following the beginning of the conflict.

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RPT - Nearly 90% of Americans View China as Competitor or Enemy - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The vast majority of Americans do not view China as a partner and express growing concerns about Beijing's human rights record and economic practices, a new Pew Research Center poll revealed on Thursday.

According to the survey results, 89 percent of adult Americans see China as a competitor or an enemy rather than a partner and support a tougher stance concerning the human rights situation in that country as well as the economy. The majority also said would support limiting the number of Chinese students allowed to study in the United States.

The Pew Research Center said it noted a significant partisan divide among Americans on issues concerning China. Republicans are more likely to describe China as an enemy and describe a number of issues in bilateral relations as serious problems while Democrats said they largely agree with Republicans only on human rights-related issues.

Thirty-six percent of Democrats are supportive of limiting the power and influence of China as compared to 63 percent of Republicans, the poll results showed.

Opinions are significantly divided over confidence in US President Joe Biden's ability to deal with China with 83 percent of Democrats saying they are confident and 19 percent of Republicans saying they are not, according to the poll results.

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Former US Deputy Envoy to UN Chalet Appointed General Assembly Under-Secretary-General

*UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - The UN chief Antonio Guterres appointed former US Acting Deputy Ambassador to the organization Cherith Norman Chalet to serve as new Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly, UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres today announced the appointment of Cherith Norman Chalet of the United States as Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management," Dujarric said.

Most recently, Chalet served as Ambassador for United Nations Management and Reform with primary responsibility on United Nations reform issues.

Before her work at the US mission to the United Nations, Chalet served in Washington as the senior legislative liaison between the State Department and the congressional Appropriations and Budget Committees and members of Congress.

Chalet will succeed Movses Abelian of Armenia, who served in the role of Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management since June 2019.

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US Welcomes Decision by E3 to Drop IAEA Resolution Rebuking Iran - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes the decision by European nations to refrain from submitting a resolution to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that would have rebuked Iran for restricting the agency's inspection activities, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"The E3 decided with the full support of the United States that the best way to support the IAEA's process was to refrain from putting forward the draft resolution at the meeting of the board of governors," Price said during a press briefing. "We are pleased with the outcome of IAEA board of governor's meeting with respect to Iran."

Earlier in the week, Germany, France and the United Kingdom announced plans to submit a US-backed draft resolution to the IAEA Board of Governors on Friday that would have aimed to rebuke Iran for restricting the organization's inspection activities. However, the Iranian Foreign Ministry urged the countries on Thursday against going forward with this step as it would disrupt the cooperation under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The IAEA chief Rafael Grossi said on Thursday that Iran was willing to sit down with the agency's technical experts in a month to discuss current issues, including recent discovery of uranium particles at suspected nuclear sites.

Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, Mihail Ulyanov, said the decision to scrap the vote on the resolution was commendable and allows for a diplomatic approach, adding that adopting the resolution could have led to "uncontrolled escalation."

On February 23, Iran started limiting the scope of the IAEA's inspections as a temporary measure until the sanctions against Iran are lifted. The UN nuclear watchdog reached a temporary bilateral understanding with Iran in February, which allows international inspectors a limited access to nuclear sites for three additional months after Iran's threat to shut them out.

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US Senate Begins Work on \$1.9 Trillion COVID-19 Relief Bill

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday afternoon formally started work on the House of Representatives-passed \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package. The Senate voted 51-50 in favor of a motion to proceed with consideration of the 2021 American Rescue Plan, with Vice President Kamala Harris casting a tie-breaking vote. The bill is expected to pass in the coming days.

The Democrat-controlled House of Representatives passed the bill last week in a 219-212 vote. In the Senate, Democrats and Republicans have 50 seats each, but Harris serves as the tie-breaking vote, which gives the Democrats a simple majority that is enough for the bill to pass. All Democrats must vote along party lines to set the stage for Harris to cast the tie-breaking vote - assuming no Republican backs the COVID-19 bill.

Republicans have said that only a small portion of the \$1.9 trillion bill actually deals with combating the coronavirus while many parts such as foreign assistance they deemed unnecessary and wasteful.

However, Democrat leader Chuck Schumer has said the bill would help fund small businesses, keep teachers, firefighters and other essential employees on the job, provide food and direct cash payments to millions of impoverished Americans as well as speed up vaccinations.

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US Gravely Concerned by Coup, 'Bloodshed' in Myanmar - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday Washington was seriously concerned about Myanmar's military violent crackdown on protesters ahead of the UN Security Council meeting on the issue this week.

"Looking to tomorrow, we will be holding closed consultation on Burma [Myanmar]. The United States is gravely concerned about the coup and the bloodshed that has followed there," Thomas-Greenfield said. "Instead of demonstrating respect for the rule of law, pursuing dialogue and refraining from violence, the military has dramatically accelerated violence against the people of Burma."

Thomas-Greenfield called unacceptable the use of violence by Myanmar's security forces against peaceful protesters opposing the seizure of power and urged the UN Security Council to unite on Friday in insisting on the reversal of the coup.

"The people of Burma have stood firm for democracy," Thomas-Greenfield said. "Our voices need to be equally firm, and they must be united in supporting the people of Burma."

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

Earlier, UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener said that Wednesday was the bloodiest day since the military coup, with the single-day death toll standing at 38.

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Houthis Give UN Permits to Travel To Safer Oil Tanker, Timeline Still Unclear - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - The rebel Houthi movement gave the United Nations technical mission permission to travel to assess the decaying Safer oil tanker in Yemen, yet, the organization is still unable to provide dates for the mission's deployment on the vessel, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Thursday.

The mission to examine the tanker anchored in the Red Sea with 1.1 million barrels of oil was planned to start in March, after running into several delays due to a series of requests from the rebel Houthis in Yemen.

"We continue to discuss several pending logistical issues for the mission with the Houthis. These issues are a major reason why we've had to delay the planned deployment that was supposed to happen this month," Dujarric said.

"The discussions, however, have been proceeding: we recently got travel permits for mission's personnel, but so far, we don't have any concrete solutions for some of the other pending issues. Until those other issues are resolved, we're not in a position to spend more donor money to rent a vessel or estimate a new timeline for the mission," Dujarric said.

On February 24, the spokesman said Houthis made some additional requests focused on logistics and security arrangements regarding the United Nations team's deployment.

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

The United Nations had initially planned to send the repair and assessment team in late January to prevent an environmental disaster in case oil spills in the sea.

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Eight-Nine Percent of Americans View China as Competitor or Enemy - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The vast majority of Americans do not view China as a partner and express growing concerns about Beijing's human rights record and economic practices, a new Pew Research Center poll revealed on Thursday.

According to the survey results, 89 percent of adult Americans see China as a competitor or an enemy rather than a partner and support a tougher stance concerning the human rights situation in that country as well as the economy. The majority also said would support limiting the number of Chinese students allowed to study in the United States.

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Opinions are significantly divided over confidence in US President Joe Biden's ability to deal with China with 83 percent of Democrats saying they are confident and 19 percent of Republicans saying they are not, according to the poll results.

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Canadian Health Official Says Johnson & Johnson Vaccine Decision to Come Down Within Week

TORONTO, March 4 (Sputnik) - A review of the coronavirus vaccine produced by the Johnson & Johnson subsidiary Janssen Pharmaceuticals will be completed soon and a regulatory decision will come down within the next seven days, Health Canada Chief Medical Advisor Supriya Sharma said during a briefing on Thursday.

"The review of the Johnson & Johnson submission is going very well, it's progressing. And we're expecting to have that completed and a decision in the next few days - I would say in the next seven days or so," Sharma told reporters in Ottawa.

On Saturday, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Johnson & Johnson's single-shot coronavirus vaccine for emergency use.

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

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Biden Tracking Extremist Threats Amid Fears of New Attack on US Capitol - White House

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden tracking extremist threats in the country amid growing concerns of a new attack on the Capitol, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Thursday.

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. As of Thursday at noon, there has been no visible threat to the Capitol.

"The President personally remains deeply engaged in tracking these threats and receiving regular updates from his team," Psaki said when asked about additional security measures. She declined to discuss specific details, but noted that the intelligence community is providing analysis on a regular basis.

"We have been vigilant day in and day out," Psaki said.

Acting US Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said last month that there is intelligence suggesting US militia groups are threatening to attack the US Capitol during President Joe Biden's upcoming State of the Union address. Biden has yet to set a date for his first State of the Union address.

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US-UK Tariff Freeze 'Creates Space' for Settling Aircraft Trade Dispute - White House

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US and UK agreed to suspend tariffs to provide space for settling the trade dispute between Boeing and Airbus, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday.

Earlier on Thursday, the US and UK agreed to suspend retaliatory tariffs on scotch whiskey, cashmere, and other products that were imposed amid the dispute between the Boeing and Airbus aircraft manufacturers.

"It was meant to de-escalate the issue and create space for a negotiated settlement to the Airbus and Boeing disputes," Psaki said.

In 2006, the United States filed a case with the WTO accusing European aircraft manufacturer Airbus of receiving \$22 billion in illegal subsidies. After the EU filed a counterclaim, the WTO ruled both sides illegally subsidized their respective aircraft companies.

The suspension announced today is for four months and will come into force on March 8.

The United Kingdom in late January lifted EU tariffs that were slapped on US goods over the Airbus-Boeing dispute, once the country left the bloc's single market and customs union.

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US Senators Seek to Provide Sahel Region Allies Long-Term Counterterrorism Capabilities

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The leaders of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jim Risch and Bob Menendez, introduced bipartisan legislation on Thursday that seeks to provide the United States' African partners a long-term capability to root out the growing threat of terrorism in the Sahel region.

"The legislation establishes a policy framework and strategies requirements to better diplomacy, development tools and security assistance to address the wide range of factors that contribute to terrorism and violent extremism," the Committee said in a press release.

The release said the 2021 Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership Program Act would bolster long-term capabilities for US allies and partners countering terrorism in the Sahel region. The legislation would also require the State Department to develop comprehensive strategies to address security, economic, humanitarian, and governance issues for the entire Sahel-Maghreb region, the release added.

West Africa and the Sahel have faced widespread political turmoil and security challenges, especially from al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups (banned in Russia) that have carried out attacks throughout the region.

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Canadian Premiers Call on Trudeau Government to Increase Federal Health Transfers

TORONTO, March 4 (Sputnik) - The premiers of Canada's largest provinces on Thursday called on the government of Justin Trudeau to increase federal health transfers.

"Today, we all have the same message for the federal government: now is the time to act and increase the Canada Health Transfer," Quebec Premier Minister Francois Legault said during a virtual meeting with other provincial leaders.

Canadian provinces currently shoulder 78 percent of the country's healthcare costs, according to British Columbia Premier John Horgan, who expressed his desire to see an equal share of responsibility between the provinces and the federal government for healthcare funding.

All of the premiers were united in saying that healthcare systems in each of their respective provinces have been stretched to the limit by the coronavirus pandemic, and the survival of Canada's publicly funded medical system now hangs in the balance.

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Biden 'Greatly Concerned' About Journalist Detainments in Myanmar - White House

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and senior administration officials are very concerned about the targeting and detainments of media representatives in Myanmar and the administration has raised the issue at every opportunity, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"The detainment of journalists, the targeting of journalists is certainly something that is of great concern to the President, to the Secretary of State and to every member of our administration," Psaki said. "Certainly, this issue has been raised - the issue broadly - is raised in virtually every diplomatic conversation that members of our team have."

Psaki also said that the situation on the ground in Myanmar is troubling and the administration is working closely with United States' partners in the region in addition to implementing restrictive measures against the country's military.

"We've taken sanctions steps as you know to send a clear message that it's unacceptable," she said.

On Sunday, thousands of people took to the streets in multiple cities across Myanmar to protest the military coup that took place early last month. Tensions appear to be rising as protesters and law enforcement clashed during the protests resulting in an unspecified number of dead.

On February 1, Myanmar's military overthrew the government and declared a year-long state of emergency. The military detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other senior officials having accused them for election fraud.

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US, Georgian Defense Chiefs Agree to Continue Close Security Cooperation - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and his Georgian counterpart Juansher Burchuladze agreed during their first conversation over the telephone on Thursday to maintain close security cooperation, the Defense Department said in a statement on Thursday.

"Both leaders agreed that the close bilateral security cooperation between the U.S. and Georgia must be sustained, with future cooperation building upon the gains achieved in recent years," the statement said.

Austin reaffirmed the United States' support for Georgia's sovereignty and its commitment to helping the country's defense capabilities, the statement added.

The United States and Georgia have fostered close ties ever since the fall of the Soviet Union of which defense cooperation has been one of the many areas of deepening bilateral relations. Georgia is one of the top troop contributors in the US war on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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US Unlikely to Reach Maximum Employment Anytime This Year - Fed Chairman Powell

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is not expected to see a return to maximum employment anytime this year despite improvements in the next couple months, Chairman Jerome Powell said on Thursday.

Maximum employment is one of the Federal Reserve's key criteria for raising interest rates. Under the central bank's definition, maximum employment is the highest level of employment, or lowest level of unemployment, that the economy can sustain while maintaining a stable inflation rate.

"Presumably in the next couple of months we'll start to see improvements in employment," Powell said at an event hosted by the Wall Street Journal. "But I think it's not at all likely it would reach maximum employment this year. I think it's going to take some time to get there."

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus pandemic. 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.

Since the pandemic broke out, the Fed has kept US interest rates at between zero and 0.25 percent and pledged not to raise them until it sees maximum employment and inflation consistently at above 2 percent per annum.

Asked what would be an ideal US jobless rate for the Fed, Powell said four percent would be a nice but it would take more than that to reach max employment.

"In the next year or so, more likely prices will move up, but not stay up, and certainly not enough to move inflation expectations above 2 percent. We think it's unlikely that deeply-held inflation expectations are changed," he said.

On that front, he said the United States was "still a long way from Fed goals" and the central bank will be "patient" when it comes to raising rates.

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Myanmar Ambassador to UN Recently Fired by Military to Remains at Post - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - Myanmar's Ambassador to the United Nations U Kyaw Moe Tun who was fired by the military last week, remains the country's Permanent Representative to the world's body, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

Kyaw Moe Tun informed UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Monday that he remained Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations. Shortly after, the Myanmar military authorities sent a letter to the United Nations saying the ambassador's duties were terminated and the deputy envoy, U Tin Maung Naing, will be temporarily heading the diplomatic mission in New York.

"In addition to the communications which we have received in the past few days concerning the Permanent Representative of Myanmar, we have also received a communication yesterday

from the Permanent Mission of Myanmar, informing us that the deputy Permanent Representative of Myanmar, Mr. U Tin Maung Naing, has submitted his letter of resignation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar and recalling that Mr. Kyaw Moe Tun remains the Permanent Representative of Myanmar to the United Nations" Dujarric said.

The spokesperson pointed out that the relevant communication was circulated to the Chair of the UN Credentials Committee.

On February 1, Myanmar's military overthrew the government and declared a year-long state of emergency. The military arrested State Chancellor Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior officials after accusing her party of rigging the November elections.

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US Lawmakers Introduce Bill to End Nuclear-Armed, Sea-Launched Cruise Missile Program

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - US Senator Chris Van Hollen and Congressman Joe Courtney on Thursday introduced a bill to terminate the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile program that was reinstated by the Trump administration.

"Putting new, expensive nuclear warheads on attack submarines and surface ships that haven't carried those weapons in almost thirty years is a distraction that will suck precious resources away from the most pressing need of the US Navy - namely, to increase the size of its overworked fleet," Courtney said in a press release.

President Donald Trump revived the program, which President Barack Obama retired in 2013. The lawmakers emphasized that the "wasteful" program is too expensive, adding that arming Virginia-class attack submarines with Tomahawk missiles is in the highest demand in the Indo-Pacific and European regions.

In 2019, the Congressional Budget Office projected that the program to develop the missile would cost \$9 billion from 2019 to 2028. The projection does not include the estimated costs for production and integrating the missile on ships.

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All Quiet at US Capitol Despite Police Warnings of Possible Militia Attack

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - There are no signs of looming disturbances in the vicinity of the US Capitol on Thursday afternoon despite a police warning that a US militia may attempt to attack the seat of Congress, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene.

Adjacent streets and the National Mall appear very quiet with journalists making up the largest public gathering outside of the security perimeter maintained around the domed building since the January 6 assault, the reporter said.

Fears that caused raising the threat level stemmed from a conspiracy theory that March 4 is a true inauguration day to reinstate Donald Trump as US presidency. The conspiracy theory was taken so seriously that the House of Representatives canceled its session on Thursday and the Capitol police issued a statement that is aware of a suspected plot and has prepared accordingly.

The Capitol grounds have been surrounded by several layers of fences with barbed wire atop and patrolled by numerous armed National Guard troops, the reporter said.

There are about 5,000 soldiers, approximately one-fifth of a contingent deployed in the city after the January 6 incident when some of the Trump supporters entered the Capitol. The supporters tried to protest lawmakers accepting electoral slates from US states that Trump claims were invalid and robbed him of election victory.

The Capitol police reportedly asked for a 60-day extension of the National Guard presence that was set to expire in mid-March.

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Smugglers Throw 20 Migrants Fleeing Somalia to Drowning Deaths - UN Agency
WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Smugglers threw at least 20 people trying to flee from Somalia to Yemen to their deaths drowning in the Gulf of Aden earlier this week, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a UN agency, said in a press release on Thursday.

"At least 20 people have drowned after smugglers threw dozens of migrants overboard early Wednesday morning during their journey from Djibouti to Yemen, the third such incident on the Gulf of Aden in six months," the release stated.

Survivors receiving medical treatment at the IOM Migrant Response Center in Obock said at least 200 migrants, including children, were crowded aboard the vessel when it departed. Thirty minutes into the journey the smugglers threw around 80 people into the sea. Five bodies were recovered on Wednesday, the agency said.

"We work closely with the authorities in Djibouti to assist migrants, but Wednesday's tragedy is further proof that criminals continue to exploit people desperate to improve their lives for profit regardless of the consequences," IOM Djibouti Chief of Mission Stephanie Daviot said in the release.

Every year, tens of thousands of young African migrants from the region make the dangerous journey from countries like Somalia and Ethiopia to Djibouti, before boarding vessels to Yemen and traveling onwards to the Gulf nations in search of work, the IOM explained.

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Biden Called Off Plans to Strike Second Target in Syria on February 26 Reports

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden planned two strikes in Syria on February 26 but had to cancel one after receiving an urgent report, the Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday.

The report received by Biden contained the battlefield reconnaissance about a group of civilians, a woman and a couple of children, being spotted in the courtyard at one of the sites, the report said. As a result, Biden removed the second target but continued with the strike on the first objective, according to the report.

US officials said the goal of the strike was not to escalate a confrontation with Iran but to respond to a rocket attack that took place on February 15 in the northern Iraq against US-led coalition. Another key objective was not to undermine Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi who is viewed by Washington as an ally in the fight against the Islamic State (a terrorist group outlawed in Russia).

On February 15, the Erbil airport located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq went under a rocket attack with reports of at least one person killed and several injured, including a US service member. February 26 retaliation strike was the first military operation of the Biden administration since taking office in January.

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Pentagon Reviewing US Capitol Police Request to Extend National Guard Stay for 2 Months

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is reviewing a request from US Capitol Police to extend the National Guard deployment at the Capitol for two more months, a Pentagon official told Sputnik on Thursday.

"I can tell you the Department of Defense has received a request for continued support from the US Capitol Police, and is currently reviewing that request," the official said.

The Capitol Police did not immediately respond to Sputnik for additional details about its request.

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. As of Thursday at noon, there has been no visible threat to the Capitol.

However, the Capitol 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.

Acting US Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said last month that there is intelligence suggesting US militia groups are threatening to attack the US Capitol during President Joe Biden's upcoming State of the Union address. Biden has yet to set a date for his first State of the Union address.

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US Treasury Announces \$9Bln Emergency Fund for Communities Hardest Hit by COVID

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department announced on Thursday a \$9 billion Emergency Capital Investment Program (ECIP) to provide funding to communities traditionally excluded from the financial system and ones that have struggled the most during the coronavirus crisis.

"The program will ultimately invest \$9 billion in Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and minority depository institutions, supporting their efforts to provide financial products for small and minority-owned businesses and consumers in low-income and underserved communities," the Treasury Department said in a news release.

The \$9 billion ECIP will also complement some \$3 billion of grants provided by the CDFI Fund through the CDFI Rapid Response Program and the Emergency Support and Minority Lending Program, the release said.

"America has always had financial services deserts, places where it's very difficult for people to get their hands on capital so they can, for example, start a business. But the pandemic has made these deserts even more inhospitable," US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in the release. "The Emergency Capital Investment Program will help these places that the financial sector hasn't typically served well. It will allow people to access capital, especially in communities of color and rural areas."

The Treasury Department explained the programs under the ECIP were designed to provide relief at a moment when many households and small businesses were struggling as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, and the pain was not evenly distributed across the country.

Aside from piecemeal programs like the ECIP, the Biden administration is also working to issue through Congress a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill, which will provide, among others, \$1,400 checks to most Americans and grants for small businesses.

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US Senate Panel Votes 11-9 to Support Biden's Nominee for Interior Secretary - Chairman

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on Friday voted in support of President Joe Biden's nominee for Interior Secretary - Deb Haaland, Committee Chairman Joe Manchin said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, the US Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held a business meeting to consider the pending nomination of U.S. Representative Debra Haaland (D-NM) to be the Secretary of the Interior. ... she passed out of Committee by a recorded vote of 11-9," the release said.

Manchin pointed out in the release that he does not personally agree with some of Haaland's previous statements and policy stances, but will serve Biden's agenda as Interior Secretary. "And, as a former Governor, I understand the importance of having one's own team in place. It is especially important that President Biden has the department heads he wants, since they make up his Cabinet," he said.

Manchin underscored that he supports Haaland's nomination and anticipates working with her "to protect our public lands and ensure the responsible use of all our natural resources in a bipartisan manner."

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Swedish Man Extradited to US Pleads Guilty to \$16Mln Cryptocurrency Fraud - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - A Swedish citizen extradited to the United States for running a cryptocurrency fraud scheme has pleaded guilty to obtaining more than \$16 million from his victims after promising them profits in gold, the US Justice Department said in a news release on Thursday.

Roger Nils-Jonas Karlsson, 47, was arrested in Thailand on June 17, 2019 and charged with a US criminal complaint for using his company - Eastern Metal Securities (EMS) - to defraud more than 3,500 people.

"Karlsson pleaded guilty to all the charges pending against him. EMS has ceased to exist," the release said.

The Justice Department explained that Karlsson used EMS between November 27, 2012 and June 19, 2019 to make fraudulent representations and convince victims to send funds using a virtual currency exchange.

During the same period, Karlsson and EMS used deceptive "devices and contrivances" to sell securities and then tried to conceal the proceeds of the wire fraud and securities fraud.

Karlsson admitted to prosecutors that he had no way to pay off the investors and transferred their funds to his personal bank accounts and then used proceeds to purchase expensive homes and a resort in Thailand.

Karlsson faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison and a maximum \$250,000 fine for the wire fraud and securities fraud charges, and 20 years in prison and a \$500,000 maximum fine for the money laundering charge, the release said.

The court may order an additional term of supervised release, fines or other assessments, and restitution, the release added.

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Western Countries Trying to Strip Syria of Rights in OPCW - Russian Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - The Western countries are trying to strip the Syrian government of its rights in the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

"Our Western colleagues are now trying to initiate a process to strip it [Syria] of its rights in the OPCW," Nebenzia told a UN Security Council meeting.

In 2014, the OPCW set up the fact-finding mission to establish the truth about the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Russia has on numerous occasions accused the OPCW of being biased against Syria and claimed that the organization was being used as a political tool by Western countries to put pressure on "undesirable" states.

Nebenzia expressed hope that most other countries will refrain from participating in what he characterized is a provocation.

"It is completely clear that there is nothing unusual in the Syrian chemical weapons case," Nebenzia said.

The Western countries are using the chemical weapons case against Syria as an instrument to punish what the Western countries view as "undesirable authorities" in Damascus, Nebenzia added.

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US Will Hold To Account Those Using 'Horrorific' Chemical Weapons in Syria - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the UN Security Council on Thursday that Washington remained committed to holding accountable all those responsible for using chemical weapons in Syria.

"I was struck by the magnitude of the atrocities committed by the Assad regime: after ten years of civil war, tens of thousands of innocent civilians are now dead, and far more, far too many of them were slain with Assad's lethal horrific chemical weapons," Thomas-Greenfield said during her first speech on the issue of the Syria chemical dossier.

"The United States remains committed to holding those who use these horrific weapons to account," she said.

The US envoy called on the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), probing alleged use of toxic chemicals in the Syrian conflict, to send an unequivocal message to the Syrian government that the use of chemical weapons has "real and serious" consequences. Thomas-Greenfield said it was also the responsibility of the UN Security Council to ensure serious consequences for the use of such weapons.

"We ask that the Security Council unites once more," she said. "Let us place the use of chemical weapons where it belongs - in the dustbin of history."

The Syrian Civil War has been ongoing since 2011, with Assad's forces fighting against different insurgent groups. Throughout the conflict, Damascus has been accused of using chemical weapons. The Syrian side has been continuously denying the allegations.

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UN Says US Sanctions Against Russia, China Under Declared Emergency Violate Human Rights

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - UN experts from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said in a statement on Thursday that the United States sanctions imposed against several countries under a declared state of emergency, including against Russia and China, violate a wide range of human rights.

"The sanctions authorized by US on the base of announced states of emergency violate a wide range of human rights in China, Cuba, Haiti, Iran, Nicaragua, the Russian Federation, Syria, Venezuela, Zimbabwe and other countries around the world, including rights to freedom of movement, of association, to due processes such as fair trial and the presumption of innocence, as well economic and social rights and the very right to life," the experts said.

UN Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures Alena Dpuhan and independent expert on human rights and international solidarity Obiora Okafor said the US emergencies often violate the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which allows states to neglect certain rights when the very existence of states is in danger.

"Emergencies declared by the United States often last years... Instead of being true emergencies, they seem like excuses to impose sanctions indefinitely," the experts said.

They pointed out that among the reasons for US emergency declarations and sanctions are allegations of human rights abuses and efforts by international prosecutors to investigate Americans suspected of war crimes.

"None of these present an existential risk to the United States," the experts said.

They also noted that some of the US sanctions resulting from emergency declarations deny rights to people who allegedly engage in activities, such as helping with post-conflict reconstruction in Syria. Moreover, the United States imposed secondary sanctions against individuals who allegedly interact with sanctioned people and governments.

"These are penalties that are imposed without respecting due process rights in the ICCPR, like the right to fair trial," the experts said.

The experts called on the United States to fully comply with the key international human rights treaty and prevent any negative impact on the human rights of those sanctions under emergency declarations.

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US, Taiwan Partner in Event to Boost Business in Eswatini Kingdom - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States and Taiwan have jointly held an online event to boost business opportunities in the southern African kingdom of Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland, the US Department of State said in a media note on Thursday.

"The embassies of the United States and Taiwan in the Kingdom of Eswatini partnered with the Government of Eswatini to host a virtual Partnership Opportunity Delegation," the note said.

"The virtual delegation included business leaders from the United States and Taiwan who met with Eswatini Minister of Commerce Manqoba Khumalo."

The event featured the designated US Ambassador to Eswatini Jeanne Maloney, Taiwan Ambassador to Eswatini Jeremy Liang, State Department Managing Director for Global Partnerships Thomas Debass and Prosper Africa's Managing Director for Africa Operations Brinton Bohling, the note said.

"The United States and Taiwan are working together with Eswatini to identify private sector opportunities that will strengthen the information technology sector in Eswatini," the State Department said.

During the meeting, executives from Eswatini, the United States and Taiwan discussed several areas related to high-tech collaboration, including the development of a regional eCommerce hub based in Eswatini to serve all southern Africa, the release added.

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US, Japanese Officials Discuss Indo-Pacific Security, COVID-19 – State Department

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) – Top diplomats from the United States and Japan held virtual talks on Thursday to discuss security in the Indo-Pacific and the impact of COVID-19 in the region, the State Department said.

"Participants exchanged views on the Indo-Pacific security environment, including the impact of COVID-19, as well as regional issues and bilateral defense cooperation," the department said in a statement.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Japan and Korea Marc Knapper and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia Security Mary Beth Morgan represented the US side at the talks, while Deputy Director General for North American Affairs, Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, Yutaka Arima and Deputy Director General for Defense Policy, Ministry of Defense Taro Yamato attended the talks for Japan.

Both parties reiterated their strong opposition to China's unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion in the East and South China Seas, the statement added.

The US and Japan also shared deep concerns over the China's Coast Guard Law, and confirmed their commitment to bolster their bilateral alliance, it added.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Rise 1% as COVID-19 Challenge Persists - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims rose by just over 1 percent last week as some 745,000 Americans filed for unemployment benefits, the Labor Department said on Thursday, as the coronavirus pandemic maintained its stranglehold on the job market.

"In the week ending February 27, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 745,000, an increase of 9,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.

The number was slightly smaller than the 750,000 filings forecast for last week by economists surveyed by US media. Yet, one year into the COVID-19 crisis, the data shows that fixing the job market remains a herculean challenge.

"The claims number is still well above pre-pandemic levels," Greg Michalowski said in a post on ForexLive, citing the 281,000 filings from the week ended March 15, 2020, before the numbers exploded with the outbreak of COVID-19.

The Labor Department said that continuing weekly claims — reported with a one-week lag but sometimes considered a better gauge of the labor market — slid to 4.29 million for the week ended February 27, from a previous 4.42 million. The unemployment rate also dipped slightly, by 0.1 percentage point, to 3.0 percent.

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.

The Labor Department's full employment statistics for February will be published on Friday.

Economists are expecting a jobs growth of 182,000 last month after January's expansion of 49,000.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Rise to 745,000 Last Week - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Some 745,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, demonstrating the US job market's continued difficulty in turning the corner from the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending February 27, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 745,000, an increase of 9,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.