

Wires 9/17/20

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US Charges Parnas, Correia With Conspiring to Defraud Investors - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice announced on Thursday that it has charged Ukraine-born businessman Lev Parnas and his colleague David Correia, who allegedly acted on behalf of US President Donald Trump to undermine Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's campaign, with conspiring to defraud investors.

"LEV PARNAS and DAVID CORREIA were charged in a Superseding Indictment with conspiring to commit wire fraud in connection with their efforts to raise funds ostensibly for their business," the statement said.

The indictment also includes additional campaign finance charges against the defendants.

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US Legislation Would End China Most-Favored Nation Trade Status - Senator

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - China would lose the most-favored-nation (MFN) status, which extends trade concessions for one nation to all countries, under legislation introduced by US Senator Tom Cotton on Thursday.

"Twenty years ago this week, the Senate gave a gift to the Chinese Communist Party by granting it permanent most-favored-nation status. That disastrous decision made the Party richer, but cost millions of American jobs. It's time to protect American workers and take back our leverage over Beijing by withdrawing China's permanent trade status," Cotton said in a press release announcing the bill.

China could still maintain its MNF status with the United States, but the privilege would have to be renewed by the US president annually, with Congress allowed to override the decision of the president, the release said.

The bill also includes a list of human-rights and trade abuses that would disqualify China for MFN status, absent a presidential waiver, the release said.

The list includes the use of slave labor, re-education prison camps, forced abortion or sterilization and organ harvesting from prisoners, the release added.

Other listed abuses include religious persecution, harassment of expatriate Chinese who are critical of the government and the theft of intellectual property from Americans, according to the release.

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Trump Pledges to Fight Leftist Cultural Revolution With Patriotic Education

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump announced on Thursday that he will establish a commission to promote patriotic education in an effort to counter what he described is a leftist "crusade against American history."

"Today, I am also pleased to announce that I will soon sign an executive order establishing a national commission to promote patriotic education. It will be called the 1776 Commission," Trump said in remarks during the White House Conference on American History. "It will encourage our educators to teach our children about the miracle of American history and make plans to honor the 250th anniversary of our founding."

Trump accused left wing activists, politicians, media and businesses of waging a cultural revolution "designed to overthrow the American revolution," including in classrooms, where children are taught to be ashamed of their own history.

"The left wing rioting and mayhem are the direct result of decades of left wing indoctrination in our schools. It has gone on for far too long... The crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison that if not removed will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together, destroy our country," Trump said.

"We embrace the vision of Martin Luther King where the children are not judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. The left is attempting to destroy that beautiful vision and divide Americans by race. By viewing every issue through the lens of race, they want to impose a new segregation and we must not allow that to happen," he said.

According to Trump, the restoration of patriotic education is urgently needed in US schools to counter the existing left-wing indoctrination.

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Pompeo Warns During Visit to Suriname of Chinese Investments Exacting Political Costs

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said during his visit to Suriname on Thursday that China is leveraging economic investment to exact political influence inconsistent with the best interests of the people.

"We've watched the Chinese Communist Party invest in countries and it all seems great at the front end, and then it all comes falling down when the political cost connected to that becomes clear," Pompeo said. "[The Chinese] often show up in ways that are inconsistent with the values that I've heard [Surinamese President Chan Santokhi] speak about, the things that are best for the people of Suriname."

Pompeo noted that the United States welcomes what he called was true Chinese competition, but such competition does not happen very often under the leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The secretary of state went on to highlight the merits of US businesses to enter a new market, including an intolerance for corruption and crony capitalism.

Pompeo is the first US secretary of state to visit Suriname. During his visit, he will meet with US oil and mining companies that have expressed interest in the newfound oil reserves in Suriname and neighboring Guyana.

Pompeo is scheduled to visit Guyana next after his stop in Suriname.

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US Defense Giant Wins \$298Mln to Build Space Force Satellite - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - US Space Force awarded defense contractor Northrop Grumman nearly \$300 million to build a new military satellite, the company said in a statement on Thursday.

"Northrop Grumman Corporation has been awarded a contract by the US Space Force for the rapid prototyping phase of the Evolved Strategic SATCOM (ESS) program to develop a modernized strategic communications space segment with enhanced resilience and cybersecurity capabilities," the release said.

The company also said the contract for the new military satellite was worth \$298 million.

The ESS will allow satellites – especially in polar regions – to survive hacking and jamming attempts by adversaries, the release added.

During the rapid prototyping phase, the company will deliver a preliminary design for the ESS for a ground-based demonstration, according to the release.

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US Ice Cream Giant Fined \$17Mln Over Listeria Outbreak - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - Texas-based Blue Bell Creameries must pay a record fine of more than \$17 million for shipping ice cream products contaminated with listeria, the US Justice Department said on Thursday.

"A federal court in Texas sentenced ice cream manufacturer Blue Bell Creameries L.P. to pay \$17.25 million in criminal penalties for shipments of contaminated products linked to a 2015 listeriosis outbreak, the Justice Department announced today," the department said in a statement. "The \$17.25 million fine and forfeiture amount is the largest-ever criminal penalty following a conviction in a food safety case."

Blue Bell's products, the release added, were allegedly manufactured under insanitary conditions and contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes* - a dangerous pathogen that can lead to serious illness or death in vulnerable populations such as pregnant women, newborns, and the elderly.

FDA inspections revealed sanitation issues at two facilities, including problems with the hot water supply needed to properly sterilize equipment, as well as conditions that could lead to insanitary water dripping into product mix during the manufacturing process, according to the release.

Blue Bell temporarily closed all of its plants in late April 2015 as a result and has since taken steps to correct faulty sanitation deficiencies, the release said.

Blue Bell pleaded guilty in May 2020 to two misdemeanor counts of distributing adulterated ice cream products, the release said.

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US Charges 3 Iranians for Allegedly Hacking Aerospace Companies- Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The US government indicted three men for allegedly hacking American aerospace companies on behalf of Iran's military, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"An indictment was unsealed today charging three computer hackers, all of whom were residents and nationals of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran), with engaging in a coordinated campaign of identity theft and hacking on behalf of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)... steal critical information related to United States aerospace and satellite technology and resources," the department said in a statement.

The indictment represents the third set of charges against Iranian hackers in the past three days, the release said.

Charged in the indictment are defendants Said Pourkarim Arabi, Mohammad Reza Espargham, and Mohammad Bayati, all Iranian nationals residing in Iran, the release added.

The hackers sought to identify US citizens working in satellite and aerospace industries so defendants could use their names to register email addresses and fraudulently purchase domains and hacking tools for the scheme, according to the release.

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Trump Accuses Michigan Authorities of Purposely Leaving Pence Off Ballot

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump in a statement on Thursday accused Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson of purposely leaving out Vice President Mike Pence's name of some ballot for overseas voters.

"The Democrat Trump hater Secretary of State of Michigan, purposely misprinted ballots for the military, putting the wrong names on the ballot, and actually listing a member of another party as a replacement for Vice President Mike Pence," Trump said. "Everybody is totally confused by egregious behavior, which is just the way they want it. This was not a mistake, it was done illegally and on purpose."

On Tuesday, the Detroit Free Press newspaper reported that some Michigan voters who live abroad or serve in the military may get presidential ballots that do not include Pence's name due to a temporary error in the state's database.

The report said, according to an image of the ballot, the Libertarian Party's vice presidential nominee Jeremy Cohen is listed as Trump's running mate.

The Michigan Secretary of State's Office said that there are at least 400 ballots with this error.

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US House Condemns COVID-19-Inspired Attacks on Asian Americans - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - A US House resolution approved in a 243-164 vote targets threats and attacks against Asian-Americans inspired by the novel coronavirus origin in the Chinese city of Wuhan, Congresswoman Grace Meng said in a press release on Thursday. "When the first cases of coronavirus were reported in the United States, I had advised the public about not singling out or stereotyping the Asian American community," Meng said. "But unfortunately, those efforts have not stopped acts of ignorance and bigotry from rearing their ugly heads. It's time for this hysteria and discrimination to end," Meng said.

The resolution's text calls on federal, state and local law enforcement to investigate all credible reports of hate crimes against Asian-Americans and to prosecute those responsible.

In her release announcing the vote, Meng was especially critical of Republican leaders - citing President Donald Trump and US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy by name - for using terms such as "Chinese virus" and "Wuhan virus" to characterize the novel coronavirus disease. "These are more than just hateful and irresponsible words. This language has fueled the increase of threats and attacks against those of Asian descent, and many Asian Americans continue to live in fear," Meng said.

The resolution was introduced with 157 cosponsors and won support from more than 500 organizations, according to Meng.

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Ex-US Intelligence Chief Urges Congress to Establish Election Oversight Commission

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - US Congress should create a bipartisan commission consisting of social media executives, political leaders, former security officials and justices to

oversee this year's presidential election, former Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Dan Coats wrote in a New York Times op-ed on Thursday.

"I propose that Congress... create a supremely high-level bipartisan and nonpartisan commission to oversee the election," Coats said. "Commission members... could include congressional leaders, current and former governors, 'elder statespersons,' former national security leaders, perhaps the former Supreme Court justices David Souter and Anthony Kennedy, and business leaders from social media companies."

Ensuring the credibility of the election to both Republicans and Democrats was essential if the US democratic experiment would survive, Coats wrote.

"Our democracy's enemies, foreign and domestic, want us to concede in advance that our voting systems are faulty or fraudulent; that sinister conspiracies have distorted the political will of the people; that our public discourse has been perverted by the news media and social networks riddled with prejudice, lies and ill will," he wrote.

The most urgent task American leaders face is to ensure that the election's results are accepted as legitimate. Electoral legitimacy is the essential linchpin of our entire political culture. We should see the challenge clearly in advance and take immediate action to respond, Coats said. The commission should monitor electoral mechanisms and confirm for the public that the laws and regulations governing them had been fully followed without political prejudice and without regard to political interests of either party, Coats wrote.

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Yemen's COVID-19 Death Rate as High as 30%, Estimated 1M In People Impacted - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 17 (Sputnik) - The COVID-19-related fatality rate in Yemen stands at an alarming 30 percent, while the number of people affected by the disease may reach up to 1 million, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday. "There are more than 2,000 confirmed [cases] of COVID-19 in Yemen, but experts estimate that there are possibly up to 1 million people impacted by the virus, with a fatality rate as high as 30 percent," Dujarric said.

As of Thursday, Yemen had registered 2,019 cases of COVID-19 infections and 583 deaths. However, the United Nations had previously warned that the actual COVID-19 spread in the Middle Eastern country might be much higher.

The numbers are likely to remain underreported due to the fragile health system destroyed by more than six years of conflict, the organization said.

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Record 173 World Leaders Will Virtually Address UN General Assembly Next Week - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 17 (Sputnik) - A record number of 119 heads of state and 54 heads of governments will virtually deliver their messages at the UN General Assembly high-level event next week, the spokesperson for the President of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, Brenden Varma, told reporters on Thursday.

"As of right now, according to the list, we have 119 heads of state and 54 heads of government," Varma said when asked about the number of leaders who confirmed their participation in the UN General Debate.

This year, the annual UN General Assembly high-level gathering will be held online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

World leaders will submit their pre-recorded messages, presented by a country's delegate, who is already in New York.

In previous years, the General Assembly event would see the participation of 70-90 countries' leaders speaking at the UN headquarters in-person.

According to the President of the 75th session of the General Assembly, Volkan Bozkir, initially, several high-level officials, including Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the country's Foreign Minister, had confirmed their in-person participation at the upcoming event planned for September 22-29.

However, Bozkir explained that due to New York State rules, requiring all visitors from abroad to quarantine for 14 days, all officials had to cancel their visits.

Varma said that as of Thursday, he did not have information about any country leader coming to the General Debate in-person.

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Justice Dept. Considered Charges Against Portland Officials Over Violent Unrest - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department has considered filing criminal or civil charges against city officials in Portland, Oregon, for mishandling the response to the violent riots in the city, Fox News reported on Thursday citing spokeswoman Kerri Kupec. The report said Kupec declined to comment on whether the Justice Department still planned to bring charges against Portland officials.

Protests against police brutality erupted in Portland and other US cities following the death of African American man George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25.

However, many of the protests turned into riots complete with violent attacks against police and civilians as well as acts of property destruction, arson and looting.

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UN Chief Urges Countries to Immediately Release Journalists Unjustly Detained - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 17 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed his concern about the scale of attacks against press workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and urged governments to immediately release journalists who have been detained for doing their work, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday. "It is clear that during the period of COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretary-General has been concerned about the number of restrictions and attacks against journalists who are just doing their job," Dujarric said. "The Secretary-General calls on governments to immediately release journalists who have been detained for exercising their profession."

Dujarric said those deprived of their liberty are particularly vulnerable to the spread of the coronavirus disease.

He added that Guterres firmly believes that free press is essential for peace, sustainable development, human rights, and democracy across nations.

On September 11, the New York City-based Committee to Protect Journalists called on Guterres to secure the release of journalists that have been jailed amid the pandemic.

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US Homebuilding Down 5.1% in August - Census Bureau

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - US homebuilding fell by 5.1 percent in August, snapping growth evident since May as the six month-long novel coronavirus crisis continued to hurt the world's largest economy, the Census Bureau said on Thursday.

"Privately-owned housing starts in August were at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1,416,000. This is 5.1 percent below the revised July estimate of 1,492,000," the Census Bureau, a component of the Commerce Department, said.

The Census Bureau noted that coronavirus-specific information related to the housing data might be issued after further scrutiny.

The housing market is the cornerstone of the US economy and accounts for nearly 15 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product.

US housing had grown steadily in the previous three months, expanding 4.3 percent in May, and 17.3 percent in June and 22.6 percent in July.

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White Supremacists Largest Group of Racially-Motivated Domestic Terrorists in US - FBI

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - White supremacists make up the largest group of racially-motivated domestic terrorists in the United States, FBI Director Christopher Wray said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"Within the domestic terrorism bucket category as a whole, racially-motivated violent extremism is I think the biggest bucket within that larger group," Wray said before the House Homeland Security Committee. "Within the racially-motivated violent extremists bucket, people ascribing to some kind of white supremacist ideology is certainly the biggest chunk of that."

Wray said racially-motivated violence has been responsible for the most lethal activity in the United States over the previous years, however, this year lethal domestic terrorism attacks have all fit in the category of anti-government and anti-authority, which covers everything from anarchists to militia types.

Earlier this month, former Department of Homeland Security (DHS) official Elizabeth Neumann told National Public Radio (NPR) that the Trump administration is creating conditions that may allow domestic right-wing extremism to expand in the United States because of President Donald Trump's rhetoric and refusal to condemn such groups.

Neumann said Trump was not comfortable talking about domestic terrorism unless it was in reference to the left-wing group Antifa and the riots and looting associated with it during the racial injustice protests this year.

Neumann added that the threat of domestic terrorism in the United States is not from Antifa, but from right-wing movements like the Boogaloo or QAnon.

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Canada Could Lose Ability to Keep COVID-19 Cases at Manageable Levels - Official

TORONTO, September 17 (Sputnik) - A spike of novel coronavirus cases in Canada could jeopardize the country's ability to keep the spread of the pandemic at "manageable levels," Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said in a statement on Thursday.

As of Thursday, the number of novel coronavirus cases in Canada has surpassed 140,000 with 9,199 virus-related deaths, government data revealed.

"The ongoing increase in new cases being reported daily continues to give cause for concern. With continued circulation of the virus, the situation could change quickly and we could lose the ability to keep COVID-19 cases at manageable levels," Tam said.

A combined 544 new cases in Ontario and Quebec pushed Canada's tally to 140,291, according to data released by provincial health agencies. Since the beginning of September, Canadian authorities have recorded more than 11,000 new infections, including more than 6,000 in the last week alone, according to government data.

Tam attributes the spike in infections to private social gatherings, attended predominantly by young adults. In the span of the last seven days, the Canadian authorities reported an average of 779 daily new infections - a 26 percent increase over the previous week.

According to Canada's public health agency, there are 8,105 active cases throughout the country.

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US Top Diplomat for East Asia Calls China 'Lawless Bully'

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - China's recent aggressive behavior illustrates why it poses a threat to the rules-based international order, US Assistant Secretary for East Asia David Stilwell said in congressional testimony on Thursday.

"The past several months alone have seen particularly egregious examples of Beijing's conduct," Stilwell said in prepared remarks to the Senate Foreign Relations committee. "These are not the actions of a responsible global actor but a lawless bully."

Stilwell referred to China's recent confrontation with India, Hong Kong's national security law and alleged human rights abuses as examples of such behavior.

The United States and its allies, he added, have engaged China for a significant period of time only to have Beijing demonstrate its unwillingness to join "the free and open international order." Reciprocally, Beijing has also frequently accused Washington of flouting international norms and rules in its effort to promote US national interests.

US-China relations have plummeted to their lowest point in years as the two preeminent global economic powers wage an trade war.

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Minneapolis Council Demands Police Fight Crime After Pledging to Scrap Them - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The Minneapolis City Council has complained that the police are not combating rising crime in the city three months after it called for the entire force to be scrapped, the Minneapolis Star-Tribune reported on Thursday.

In June, a majority on the City Council voted to abolish the police force after protests - and riots - ensued following the death of African American man George Floyd in police custody.

However, now Council President Lisa Bender says her constituents are complaining that the police are not enforcing the laws as violence and killings in the city soar to record levels.

The Minneapolis City Council pressed Police Chief Medaria Arradondo for a plan to address crime in their wards in the most forceful questioning of him yet, the report said.

Arradondo called Bender's concerns troubling to hear and urged the members of the City Council to make compromises regarding their previous statements in the interests of public safety, the report added.

Some 382 people have been shot in Minneapolis so far this year, the highest number in 15 years and 59 homicides have been recorded so far, double the annual average calculated back to 2015, according to the report.

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US Sanctions Alleged Iranian Cyber Threat Group, 45 Iranians - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on an alleged Iranian cyber threat group linked to the country's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) along with 45 associated individuals, the US Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed sanctions on Iranian cyber threat group Advanced Persistent Threat 39 (APT39), 45 associated individuals and one front company. Masked behind its front company, Rana Intelligence Computing Company (Rana), the Government of Iran (GOI) employed a years-long malware campaign that targeted Iranian dissidents, journalists and international companies in the travel sector," the release said.

Rana conducts computer intrusions and malware campaigns on behalf of Iran's MOIS against perceived adversaries, including foreign governments, the release said.

The 45 sanctioned individuals were employed by Rana as managers, programmers and hacking experts that supported MOIS cyber intrusions, which targeted of international businesses, institutions, air carriers and others, the release added.

Rana also allowed the MOIS to disguise its role in surveilling and abusing government critics inside Iran, according to the release.

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Hezbollah Caches Explosives Across Europe - US Diplomat

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - US Coordinator for Counterterrorism Nathan Sales on Thursday accused Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Lebanese movement, of stockpiling across Europe ammonia nitrate - an explosive fertiliser that destroyed the port in Beirut.

"Today the US government is unveiling new information about Hezbollah presence in Europe. Since 2012 Hezbollah has established caches of ammonium nitrate throughout Europe. Today I can reveal that some caches has been moved from Belgium to France, Greece, Italy, Spain and Switzerland," Sales said during a webinar. "I can also reveal that significant ammonium nitrate caches have been discovered and destroyed in France, Greece, Italy. We have reasons to believe that this activity is still underway."

The US diplomat claimed that Hezbollah's intention is to use the substance as a weapon for carrying out major terror attacks if such orders come from its Iranian patrons.

"The question than becomes 'Why would Hezbollah stockpile ammonium nitrate on European soil?' Answer is clear - Hezbollah has put these weapons in place so that it conduct major terror attacks whenever... Tehran deems necessary," Sales said.

He called a blast that rocked Lebanon's capital in August and destroyed its port "a vivid reminder of how dangerous ammonium nitrate can be." Sales said that the revelations show that more European countries "need to act now" to outlaw Hezbollah in its entirety - without making distinction between its military wing and political leadership.

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US Sanctions 2 Companies, 1 Individual Linked to Lebanon's Hezbollah - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on two companies and an individual in Lebanon over their alleged links to leadership of Hezbollah, the US Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned two Lebanon-based companies, Arch Consulting and Meamar Construction, for being owned, controlled, or directed by Hezbollah. Additionally, OFAC designated Sultan Khalifah As'ad, a Hezbollah Executive Council official, who is closely associated with both companies," the release said.

The Treasury Department said Hezbollah leverages Arch and Meamar to conceal money transfers to its own accounts, further enriching Hezbollah's leadership and supporters, and depriving the Lebanese people of much needed funds.

Both firms are subordinate to Hezbollah's Executive Council and several senior officials of the two companies have ties to the terrorist group, the release said.

As'ad, the senior official on the Hezbollah Executive Council, is publicly listed as a founder of Meamar and several individuals included in the company's registration documents also have public ties to Hezbollah, the release added.

With Thursday's action, the Treasury Department has sanctioned more than 90 Hezbollah-affiliated individuals and entities since 2017, according to the release.

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US Congress Must Pass \$25Bln Airline Relief Bill Before Mass Layoffs - Trump Aide

WASHINGTON, Sept 17 (Sputnik) - The White House hopes to secure quickly \$25 billion in aid from Congress to save tens of thousands of airline jobs, even as it continues negotiations in Congress for a larger \$1.5 trillion coronavirus (COVID-19) relief deal, Chief of Staff Mark Meadows said on Thursday.

"I'm meeting with airline CEOs today," Meadows told the Fox News network. "We've got tens of thousands of people that are about to be laid off, so if nothing more, let's go ahead and put that package on the floor and pass that because, hopefully, all of us can agree that laying off airline workers at this particular time is not something we should do."

American Airlines has said it will have to lay off 19,000 workers in October if federal aid of \$25 billion approved in March to protect aviation jobs from the COVID-19 pandemic isn't renewed. Delta Air Lines intends to furlough more than 1,900 pilots for similar reason.

Meadows said while President Donald Trump hoped to make a larger \$1.5 trillion coronavirus relief deal with his Democrat rivals in Congress, rescuing aviation workers would be one of his "priorities".

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FBI Chief Says Violence in US Amid Protests Not Linked to Any Group, Movement

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The violence taking place amid recent protests in the United States does not appear to be driven by any organization or movement, FBI Director Christopher Wray said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"Much of the violence that we're seeing, it does not appear to be organized or attributed to any one particular group or even movement," Wray said before the US House Homeland Security Committee.

Wray said the majority of the demonstrations in the United States in recent months have been peaceful.

Protests against police brutality erupted in Portland and other US cities following the death of African American man George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25.

Some of the protests turned into riots complete with violent attacks against police and civilians as well as acts of property destruction, arson and looting.

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FBI Director Wray Says Russia Continues to Try to Influence US Elections

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - FBI Director Christopher Wray said during a congressional hearing on Thursday that Russia allegedly continues to try to influence US elections.

"The Intelligence Community's consensus is that Russia continues to try to influence our elections, primarily through what we would call malign foreign influence as opposed to what we saw in 2016 where there was also an effort to target election infrastructure, cyber targeting, we have not seen that second part yet this cycle," Wray told the US House Homeland Security Committee.

Wray said Russia has been very active in trying to influence the 2020 US election through social media, proxies, state media and online journals.

The FBI director also said that Russia allegedly is trying to sow discord and denigrate Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden.

Russia has repeatedly denied interfering in the US political system, saying such practices run contrary to the principles of the country's foreign policy.

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US Sanctions Alleged Iranian Cyber Threat Group, 45 Iranians - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on an alleged Iranian cyber threat group linked to the country's Intelligence Ministry along with 45 associated individuals, the US Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Thursday. "Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed sanctions on Iranian cyber threat group Advanced Persistent Threat 39 (APT39), 45 associated individuals and one front company. Masked behind its front company, Rana Intelligence Computing Company (Rana), the Government of Iran (GOI) employed a years-long malware campaign that targeted Iranian dissidents, journalists, and international companies in the travel sector," the release said.

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US Sanctions 2 Companies, 1 Individual Linked to Lebanon's Hezbollah - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on two companies and an individual in Lebanon over their alleged links to leadership of Hezbollah, the Treasury Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned two Lebanon-based companies, Arch Consulting and Meamar Construction, for being owned, controlled, or directed by Hizballah. Additionally, OFAC designated Sultan Khalifah As'ad, a Hizballah Executive Council official, who is closely associated with both companies," the release said.

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US General Calls for Russia's Hypersonic Weapons to Be Included in Arms Control Talks

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John Hyten said on Thursday that he recommends the US political leadership insist on including Russia's nuclear-capable hypersonic weapons in the currently negotiated new arms control regimes.

"I want to make sure that hypersonic weapons, especially with Russia on the nuclear side, are included in future arms control treaty as well as all other new technologies... nuclear torpedos, nuclear cruise missiles - all this needs to be on the table as we discuss the future," Hyten told the National Defense University's Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction 2020 Symposium.

Hyten pointed out that the United States also pursues "a very active" hypersonic weapons program, but the capabilities that will be produced and fielded are tied to a conventional force, not to a nuclear one as in the case with Russia and China.

"I don't like that, I am not too worried about it from the nuclear deterrence perspective," Hyten said. "You have to realize the Chairman and I are just advisors, but I'll advise my political leadership... that hypersonics and nuclear don't go together very well."

The United States and Russia are negotiating the extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) - the only accord in force between the world's leading nuclear powers that caps their strategic arsenals - which is set to expire in February.

Hyten hailed the negotiations as the beginning of productive discussions with Russia and said he is in favor of extending the New START treaty for another five-year term.

"We have to get there. But more importantly you have to realize that the New START treaty will expire in 2026. Even if it is extended, it goes away in 2026," Hyten said. "There has got to be something else to replace it. I would like that process to start now. And I think we have the potential to get there, but it is going to be difficult."

Hyten acknowledged that Russia complies with the New START, but accused Moscow of building hundreds of weapons outside it and said many of them are strategic.

"As we sit down with the Russians, it's important we put everything on the table when it comes to nuclear capabilities. That's the going-in position," he said.

Hyten noted that one of the stronger points of the New START is its verification mechanism and said he does not have a problem with Russian inspections of US nuclear arsenals.

"Come see it. I like transparency," he said.

Heyten expressed hope that the world eventually will maintain some form of arms control, but warned the path will be "rocky."

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Wall Street Slumps on US Economic Worries, Tech Leads With 2% Drop

NEW YORK, Sept 17 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street fell sharply at Thursday's opening, with the technology-laced Nasdaq Composite Index leading the rout, a day after the Federal Reserve issued a dire assessment of the US economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nasdaq, which lists tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, Apple, Netflix, Google and Microsoft, was down almost 200 points, or nearly 2 percent, shortly after the opening of the New York Stock Exchange. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest indicator on the NYSE, fell more than 1 percent. The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, also lost more than 1 percent.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said on Wednesday the US economy likely needs another stimulus package to provide relief to some 11 million people who remain out of work because of the coronavirus pandemic.

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US Posts 860,000 Weekly Jobless Claims For Week to Sept 5 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - Some 860,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, down just a little from the previous week, the Labor Department said on Thursday, as the labor market continued to struggle six months into the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending September 12, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 860,000," the Labor Department said in a news release. It revised claims in the previous week to September 5 to 893,000.

Continuous claims for the latest week showed filings from 12.63 million Americans, down from the previous week's number of 13.54 million. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, stood at 8.6 percent, down 0.7 percent of a point from the previous week.

The labor market lost 21 million jobs between March and April before recovering about half of those over the subsequent months.

The US economy itself shrank at its fastest pace in history in the second quarter of 2020, contracting by 32.9 percent amid widespread lockdowns due to the COVID-19. While economic

data has been encouraging over the past three months, recovery from the pandemic has remained spotty.

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Trump Reviewing All Options On TikTok - White House Adviser Kudlow

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump is reviewing all of the White House's options on TikTok, as his administration weighs a deal between the Chinese video sharing app and US software company Oracle, White House Economic Adviser Larry Kudlow told the Fox Business network on Thursday.

"Regarding TikTok, the president has been reviewing today, as he has been the last 72 hours, all the options ... most particularly security and ownership," Kudlow. "So, we'll know more as time passes."

Trump accuses TikTok of having poor data security that would enable the government in Beijing to steal information on US users of the app. He has threatened to ban TikTok in the United States if it does not sell itself to a US entity.

CNBC reported earlier Tuesday that Oracle was to become a "trusted technology provider" in the United States for TikTok and an imminent announcement was expected from the White House.

Trump himself told reporters on Tuesday that he had a "high level of respect" for Oracle Chairman Larry Ellison, whom he described as a "really terrific guy". He added that the two companies were "really very close to a deal" and that his administration will decide on the matter "pretty soon."

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Support for Black Lives Matter in US Drops 12% Since June - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - Support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement among the US general public has dropped by 12 percent over the past three months from 67 percent to 55 percent, a Pew Research Center poll revealed. "A majority of US adults (55 percent) now express at least some support for the movement, down from 67 percent in June amid nationwide demonstrations sparked by the death of African-American George Floyd in Minneapolis," Pew said in a statement accompanying the poll on Wednesday. The percentage of Americans who said they strongly supported the BLM movement has dropped to 29 percent, a decline of almost one quarter from the 38 percent rating three months ago, the organization noted. "In June, a majority of White adults (60 percent) said they supported the movement at least somewhat; now, fewer than half (45 percent) express at least some support. The share of Hispanic adults who support the movement has decreased 11 percentage points, from 77 percent in June to 66 percent today," Pew said. The data was collected as part of larger surveys conducted June 4-10 among 9,654 US adults and from September 8 to September 13 among 10,093 adults, Pew said.

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Ex-Paraguayan Lawmaker Admits to Role in Global Money Laundering Plot - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - A former member of Paraguay's Congress and her husband have admitted to participating in an international money laundering conspiracy, the US Justice Department said in a statement. "Raimundo Va, 45, pleaded guilty today before US Chief Judge Freda Wolfson to an information charging him with one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering," the release said on

Wednesday. "His wife, Cynthia Elizabeth Tarrago Diaz, 41, pleaded guilty on September 15 ...to an information charging her with conspiracy to commit money laundering."

Tarrago, who was a member of Paraguay's Congress until January of 2019, and her husband agreed to accept \$2 million from two individuals who represented themselves to be narcotics traffickers, the release said.

A third individual, Rodrigo Alvarenga Paredes, remains free in Paraguay, the Justice Department said.

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US Attorney General Tells Prosecutors to Consider Charging Rioters With Sedition - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General William Barr has suggested to federal prosecutors across the United States that they should consider charging rioters and others committing violent acts at protests with sedition, The New York Times reported.

Barr made the suggestion in a conference call with the prosecutors last week, the report said on Wednesday, citing two persons familiar with the contents of the call.

US attorneys are concerned that the Justice Department wants to charge people with insurrection against lawful authority, which is an unusual charge for violent protesters, the report added.

Anti-racism protests, many of which have turned into riots, have been raging in major cities nationwide for months over police violence against Black people.

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US Likely Needs Another COVID-19 Stimulus Package for Remaining 11M In Unemployed - Powell

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The US economy likely needs another stimulus package to provide relief to some 11 million people who remain unemployed because of the measures implemented to fight the novel coronavirus pandemic, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said during a news conference.

"My sense is that more fiscal support is likely to be needed," Powell said on Wednesday. "Of course, the details for that are for Congress, not for the Fed. But, I would just say there are still roughly 11 million people still out of work due to the pandemic and a good part of those people were working in industries that are likely to struggle."

Congress has so far passed four phases of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act that have approved \$3 trillion to disburse as loans and grants to businesses, paycheck protection for workers and personal aid to qualifying US citizens and residents.

Both Republicans and Democrats have blamed each other for the drag over the fifth instalment of the stimulus. The dispute is over the size of the new relief package, with Democrats suggesting a package of up to \$1.5 trillion while the Republicans seeking one of \$500 billion. Powell noted that only about half of the 22 million jobs lost in March and April have been regained so far.

"We say unemployment is 8.4 percent but if you count those people who are misidentified as employed when they're actually unemployed and ... if you add those back, the level of unemployment is probably 3 percent higher," he said. "By that metric, the unemployment rate would have been in the 20s in April (itself)."

Powell also said there was a risk for those who had saved some of their unemployment benefits might have to spend them now, given that no new relief is flowing in.

"As the months pass, if there's no follow-up on that, if there isn't additional support, and there isn't a job for some of those people, or from industries where it's going to be very hard to find new work, then that will start to show up in economic activity. It will also show up in things like evictions and foreclosures and things that will scar and damage the economy," he said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Federal Reserve forecast showed that US interest rates may remain near zero over the next three years as the United States tries to get the economy back on track from the ravages of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

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White House Says One Staffer Contracted COVID-19

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - One staff member at the White House has contracted the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), administration spokesperson Kayleigh McEnany said at a press briefing.

"Yes, we're not going to confirm the identities," McEnany said on Wednesday when asked about reports of infections among White House staffers.

Trump said the staff member in question did not come into contact with him.

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FBI Has Not Detected Any Foreign Attacks on US Election Infrastructure - Director

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has not identified any foreign attacks on US election infrastructure since the start of the year, FBI Director Christopher Wray said in an address to the National Cybersecurity Summit.

"We haven't seen cyber attacks to date this year on voter registration databases, or on any systems involving primary voting. And to our knowledge, no foreign government has attempted to tamper with US vote counts," Wray said on Wednesday.

Wray noted that according to the Foreign Influence Task Force, an alleged Russian social media campaign was taken down by Twitter and Facebook before they developed "anything more than a nascent following."

Following the 2016 US presidential election, US lawmakers launched multiple investigations alleging collusion between then-presidential candidate Donald Trump and Russian officials, the most prominent of which was the US Justice Department probe headed by Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller. The investigation found no evidence of Trump-Russia collusion.

Russia has repeatedly denied interfering in the US political system, saying such practices run contrary to the principles of its foreign policy. Russian officials have also said the allegations about interference were invented to excuse the election loss of Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton as well as deflect public attention from actual instances of election fraud and corruption.

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Trump Says COVID-19 Vaccine May Be Distributed Starting October

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump during a press briefing said a vaccine for the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) could be distributed in the United States by October and up to a hundred million doses could be distributed by the end of the year. "We're on track to deliver and distribute the vaccine in a very, very safe and effective manner," Trump said on Wednesday. "We think we can start sometime in October... we'll be able to distribute at least a hundred million vaccine doses by the end of 2020."

Trump said the military will be waiting to distribute as soon as the vaccine is ready.

Earlier on Wednesday, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield told Congress during a hearing that a vaccine would not be widely available until mid-2021.

Trump said he thinks Redfield misunderstood the questions from lawmakers and made a mistake. Trump added that Redfield may not know the details of the administration's plans to distribute the vaccine.

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Trump Says Not Prepared to Sign Off on Any Deal With TikTok

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump told reporters that he is not prepared to approve the sale of Chinese video sharing app TikTok to a US entity until he has seen the proposal.

"No, I'm not prepared to sign off on anything – I have to see the deal," Trump said on Wednesday.

The President said that he will be presented with a report on the status of the Tik Tok transaction on Thursday morning.

Trump accuses TikTok of having poor data security that would enable the Chinese government to steal information on US users of the app. He has threatened to ban TikTok in the United States if it does not sell itself to a US entity. ByteDance, in response, says it has taken extraordinary measures to protect the privacy and security of its US users and has filed a suit against his administration, while actively seeking a domestic partner to avoid being shut down. US software company Oracle has emerged as a frontrunner in the bid to acquire TikTok's US operations from ByteDance. The President has expressed his desire to see the US government compensated for facilitating the transaction, but the plan is hampered by regulatory roadblocks, which prohibit direct payments to the Treasury Department.

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US Looks Forward to Working With New Japanese Prime Minister Suga - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration congratulates Yoshihide Suga on his election by the main chamber of the Japanese parliament as the next prime minister of Japan and looks forward to working with him, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement.

"I congratulate Yoshihide Suga on his election by the Diet as the next Prime Minister of Japan," Pompeo said in the statement on Wednesday.

The US-Japan alliance is the cornerstone of peace, security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and remains central to upholding a rules-based international order, Pompeo said.

"The United States looks forward to working with Prime Minister Suga in promoting the Alliance as a force for transparency, accountability, openness, prosperity, and peace in the Indo-Pacific and around the world," he said.

Pompeo also sent his congratulations to Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi who will continue in office in Suga's new government, the statement said.

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Trump Says COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution to Begin in October

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Trump said the military will be waiting to distribute as soon as the vaccine is ready.

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Russia Must Release Former US Marine Trevor Reed - House Minority Leader McCarthy

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - Former Marine Trevor Reed, sentenced to a nine-year prison term on assault charges in Russia in July, should be released at once, US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy and two Texas congressmen said in statements. "Trevor Reed has been unfairly treated in a sham trial by the Russian judicial system. I join my colleagues in calling for Trevor's release so we can bring him home," McCarthy, leader of the Republican minority in the House of Representatives, said on Tuesday. US Congressmen from the state of Texas, Michael McCaul and Mike Conaway, also demanded that Russia release Reed. On August 31, US Ambassador to Moscow John Sullivan visited Reed in prison.

Reed, a Texas native who said he was visiting Moscow temporarily, was detained by two police officers last August after being involved in a drunken altercation with two women. Reed was imprisoned for attacking and endangering the officers.

The Moscow court found Reed guilty of assaulting the officers while being transported to a police station, which caused the vehicle they were traveling in to swerve erratically.

Both officers filed a civil suit against Reed for damages. As a result, Reed was sentenced to nine years in a medium-security prison and ordered to pay \$1,374 to each of the officers.

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US Charges 2 Iranian Hackers in Massive Campaign to Steal Military Secrets - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The United States charged two Iranian nationals with cyber theft from computer systems in the United States, Europe and the Mideast in a multiyear scheme that was breathtaking in scope, the Justice department announced in a press release. The release identified the hackers as Hooman Heidarian and Mehdi Farhadi, both fugitives beyond the reach of the US authorities.

The hackers "stole hundreds of terabytes of data which typically included confidential communications pertaining to national security, foreign policy intelligence, non-military nuclear information, aerospace data, human rights activist information, personally identifiable information, and intellectual property, including unpublished scientific research," the release said on Wednesday.

In some instances, the hackers worked for the Iranian government and in other cases they sold stolen information on the black market for financial gain. They also sought to intimidate dissidents and at times simply resorted to sabotaging penetrated networks.

The release also said the hackers began stealing data in 2013, indicating that the theft may have continued for years. In the process, hackers maintained unauthorized access to targeted computer networks for extended periods of time.

The hackers targeted several US and foreign universities, a Washington, DC think tank, a defense contractor, an aerospace company, non-profit groups and foreign governments, the release added.

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Trump Identifies 22 Nations as Major Drug Producing, Trading Locations - White House

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump in an executive determination identified 22 countries as major producers or transit corridors of illicit drugs. "By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, including section 706(1) of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Year 2003, I hereby identify the following countries as major drug transit or major illicit drug producing countries," Trump said in the determination on Wednesday.

The president then listed the nations of Afghanistan, The Bahamas, Belize, Bolivia, Burma, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Jamaica, Laos, Mexico, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela in his memorandum.

"The reason countries are placed on the list is the combination of geographic, commercial, and economic factors that allow drugs to transit or be produced, even if a government has engaged in robust and diligent narcotics control measures," Trump said.

US operations targeting the illicit drug trade in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific this year with 22 international allies led to the seizure of more than 80 metric tons of cocaine and other dangerous drugs, depriving transnational criminal organizations of more than \$1.8 billion in profits, Trump added.

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US Federal Reserve Forecast Shows US Interest Rates Could Remain Near Zero Through 2023

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) – US interest rates may remain near zero over the next three years as the country tries to get the economy back on track from the coronavirus pandemic, a Federal Reserve forecast showed.

The Fed, which left rates unchanged in a range of zero to 0.25 percent at the conclusion of its September policy meeting on Wednesday, also published a forward guidance table that forecast no expected change in the rate regime until 2023.

"Effectively, we're saying that rates will remain highly accommodative until the economy is far along in its recovery and that should be a very powerful statement in supporting economic stability," Fed Chairman Jay Powell told a news conference, elaborating on the forecast. "Now we're buying \$130 billion a month across Treasury (bills). We do have the flexibility to adjust that tool and rate tool and others as well but as for right now, we think that our policy setting is appropriate to export the expansion."

The US economy shrank at its fastest pace in history in the second quarter of 2020, contracting by 32.9 percent amid lockdowns due to the pandemic. While some economic and labor market data have since been encouraging, overall recovery has been spotty.

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Minnesota Man Charged with Providing Material Support to Islamic State - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik) - A resident of the US state of Minnesota has been charged with providing support to the Islamic State terrorist group (outlawed in Russia), the Department of Justice announced in a press release.

"Abdelhamid Al-Madioum, 23, of St. Louis Park, Minnesota, has been charged by indictment with providing material support to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (IS), a designated foreign terrorist organization," the release said on Wednesday.

Al-Madioum was detained overseas by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and recently transferred into FBI custody and then returned to Minnesota, the Justice Department noted.

"On June 23, 2015, Al-Madioum, a native of Morocco and naturalized US citizen, and his family traveled from St. Louis Park, Minnesota, to Casablanca, Morocco, to visit their extended family. On July 8, 2015, Al-Madioum left Morocco and traveled to Istanbul, Turkey, and then on to Iraq and Syria, where he joined [IS]," the release said.

In March 2019, Al-Madioum was captured and detained by the SDF, the Justice Department noted.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 17 (Sputnik)

US SANCTIONS RUSSIAN NATIONALS, CHARGES CHINESE HACKERS

* The United States has imposed cyber-related sanctions on two Russian citizens, Dmitrii Karasavidi and Danil Potekhin, the US Treasury Department said in a notice on Wednesday.

* The United States has charged five Chinese and two Malaysian nationals for allegedly engaging in a worldwide hacking campaign that targeted more than 100 victims, Deputy Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen said.

* The United States charged two Iranian nationals with cyber theft from computer systems in the United States, Europe and the Mideast in a multiyear scheme that was breathtaking in scope, the Justice Department said.

FED MAINTAINS US INTEREST RATE AT 0-0.25% RANGE

* The Federal Reserve's Federal Open Market Committee said on Wednesday that it has decided to maintain the US interest rate at the zero to 0.25 percent range.

* The US interest rates may remain near zero over the next three years as the United States attempts to get the economy back on track from the effects of the novel coronavirus pandemic's restrictive measures, according to a Federal Reserve forecast.

* US economic activity remains well below the levels before the novel coronavirus pandemic in March, with just about half of the 22 million jobs lost having been recovered, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said.

DUMA REPORTS FOREIGN MEDDLING IN RUSSIAN ELECTION

* The Russian State Duma commission on investigation of foreign interference in Russia's internal affairs recorded intentional attempts to interfere in the elections on September 13 - from massive stuffing and promotion of disinformation on social networks to round-the-clock hacker attacks on the Central Election Commission, the head of the commission, chairman of the State Duma Committee On Security And Anti-Corruption Vasily Piskarev said.

BELARUS DEVELOPMENTS

* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has dismissed Ambassador to Latvia Vasily Markovich and stripped him of diplomatic rank over "improper performance of official duties," the presidential office said on Wednesday.

* Lukashenko also stripped former ambassadors to France and Slovakia, Pavel Latushko and Igor Leshchenko, of their diplomatic ranks after the two supported anti-government protests.

* Members of the European Parliament have suggested putting Russian nationals "who support the current regime in Belarus," on the sanctions list, a draft EU resolution said.

* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko asked Russian President Vladimir Putin to provide some weapons, the Belta news agency reported.