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US Senate Votes to Confirm Merrick Garland as Attorney General
by Mary F.

The Senate on Wednesday confirmed Merrick Garland, a judge on the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, as attorney general. During confirmation hearings last month, Garland promised to depoliticize the Justice Department.
In a strong bipartisan 70-30 vote, the Senate confirmed judge Merrick Garland, 68, as attorney general. Garland would be the 86th attorney general of the United States.
"America can breathe a sigh of relief that we're finally going to have someone like Merrick Garland leading the Justice Department. Someone with integrity, independence, respect for the rule of law and credibility on both sides of the aisle. He understands that the job of the attorney general is one to protect rule of law, unlike the previous attorneys general under President Trump," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said before the vote, NBC News reported.
Garland has vowed to depoliticize the Justice Department.
“I am not the president’s lawyer,” Garland told lawmakers last week, USA Today reported. “My job is to protect the Department of Justice."
During a briefing last month, Garland told lawmakers that an investigation into the deadly Capitol riots would be his top priority if he is confirmed as attorney general.
"One of the very first things I will do is get a briefing on the progress of this investigation," Garland said at the time, NPR reported. "I intend to give the career prosecutors who are working on this matter 24/7 all the resources they could possibly require to do this."
"We begin with the people on the ground, and we work our way up to those who are involved and further involved, and we will pursue these leads wherever they take us," he added, NBC News reported.
Garland has received support and approval from both Democrats and Republicans alike, who have applauded Garland's legal knowledge and experience.
Garland's confirmation just comes five years after then-president Barack Obama nominated Garland to serve on the Supreme Court. However, the Republican-controlled Senate at the time did not consider Garland's nomination. The position was instead filled by Neil Gorsuch, who was nominated by then-president Donald Trump.
Garland has been a judge on the US Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia since 1997. As a Justice Department veteran, Garland oversaw federal investigations and prosecutions linked to the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building.

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Tucker Carlson Slams Meghan Markle as 'Manipulative Opportunist' in TV Rant
by Mary F.

In a bombshell interview on Sunday with TV personality Oprah Winfrey, Prince Harry and his wife Meghan Markle revealed how they did not receive enough support from the royal family, even when Meghan experienced suicidal thoughts stemming from the incessant negative press by British tabloids.

During his "Tucker Carlson Tonight" segment on Fox News Tuesday night, host Tucker Carlson slammed Meghan Markle, calling her a "narcissist" posing as a victim.

"You know exactly who they are. He's weak and unhappy — she's a manipulative opportunist," Carlson said, referring to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, respectively, the Insider reported.

During the segment, Carlson also addressed a portion of the interview in which Markle said that Kate Middleton, the wife of Prince William, made her cry in 2018 during an argument over flower girl dresses for Markle's wedding.

At the time, tabloids reported that it was Markle who was the one that terrorized her future sister-in-law and brought her to tears.

The reverse happened," Meghan responded when Oprah asked her claims that she made Middleton cry during wedding planning.

"And I don't say that to be disparaging to anyone, because it was a really hard week of the wedding. And she was upset about something, but she owned it, and she apologized. And she brought me flowers and a note, apologizing. And she did what I would do if I knew that I hurt someone, right, to just take accountability for it," she said, Buzzfeed News reported.

In his segment, Carlson sarcastically slammed Markle for mentioning the "petty argument" with Middleton.

"Here's this royal person, one of the most famous and fawned-over people in the world, telling Oprah that she was incredibly wounded because she got into some kind of petty argument about dresses with her sister-in-law at her wedding three years ago. So stop the presses," he said, the Insider reported.

During the interview, Markle disclosed to Oprah that none of the royal family members voiced opposition to the racist media coverage of her, and that she was denied mental health support when she expressed that she was having suicidal thoughts. In addition, Prince Harry revealed that his father stopped responding to his calls after the couple announced they wanted to quit royal life, and that the toxic treatment by the British press played a large role in why the couple decided to leave the United Kingdom and move to California.

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Kushner Planning Book About Time in 'Trump White House' - Report
by Mary F.

Jared Kushner served as a senior advisor to his father-in-law, Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States. During his time in office, Kushner helped facilitate diplomatic talks between the United Arab Emirates and Israel.
Kushner is planning on writing a book about his experiences in office, an identified source told Reuters on Wednesday.
The book is expected to discuss the normalization deals Kushner helped negotiate between Israel and several Arab states, namely the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco.
The UAE and Israel signed a normalization agreement on August 13, 2020, officially referred to as the Abraham Accords. As a result, the UAE became the third Arab country, after Egypt in 1997 and Jordan in 1994, to formally formalize its relationship with Israel.
Relations between Bahrain and Israel were also normalized in September 2020. Sudan normalized relations with the Jewish state on October 23, 2020. In December 2020, Morocco normalized ties with Israel.
The deals, brokered with the help of Kushner, were touted by the Trump administration for being the first official peace deals between Israel and Arab states in decades. In January, Kushner and his deputy at the time, were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for helping negotiate the four normalization deals.
In addition to the Abraham Accords, the book is also expected to touch on prison reforms, US relations with China, Russiagate, the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as Trump's impeachment trials and the protests that occurred following the police killing of George Floyd.
Kushner is "not looking to settle scores but rather to provide historical context and help readers understand what it was like to work in the Trump White House," the source explained.
"It will be an interesting perspective from someone who had a wide-ranging portfolio, was in the room for many of the most tense and consequential moments but kept a fairly low public profile, staying behind the scenes and granting limited media access," the source added.
Kushner, 40, and his wife, Ivanka, are currently living in Miami, Florida.

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'Weren't Really Surprised': Nevada Democrats' New Socialist Chair Says Mass Exodus Was Expected
by Morgan Artyukhina

Although the Democratic Socialists of America aren't part of the Democratic Party, they often support its efforts with the intent of pulling the party leftward. When democratic socialist Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) ran for president in 2016, his campaign helped give wings to the already-rising tide of interest in socialist solutions to social ills.
After democratic socialists swept the internal leadership elections in Nevada's Democratic Party over the weekend, every single party staffer in the state quit their post.
In elections on Saturday, the Democratic Party's chairperson in Clark County, Judith Whitmer, defeated Clark County Commissioner Tick Segerblom in the race for Nevada Democratic Party

chairperson. Whitmer, backed by the DSA, was just one of four progressive candidates to win that night, giving the party's left wing decisive control over its political apparatus in the Silver State. A fifth race was lost by the narrowest of margins.
Whitmer told The Intercept they "weren't really surprised" by the mass exodus - in fact, they expected it.
"But what hit us by surprise and was sort of shocking is that for a slate that claimed that they were all about unity, and kept this false narrative of division going on throughout the entire campaign - in fact they kept intensifying that - that's what was surprising about it, was the willingness to just walk away, instead of working with us," she said.
According to the Las Vegas Review-Journal, the race was both tight and fierce, with party elites, including US Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, pushing candidates to oppose the rise of the leftist bloc, which has grown strong in the wake of Bernie Sanders' unsuccessful campaigns for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 2016 and 2020. They called for "unity," claiming the leftists were unnecessarily dividing the party, while Whitmer and others claimed the establishment figures were too wedded to a political machine.
In February 2020, the Vermont senator who likewise identifies as a democratic socialist swept the Nevada primary caucuses, winning over key working-class sectors like labor unions, as well as every single age category except those over 65, who went for now-US President Joe Biden.
"There was a desire among leadership to encourage Tick to try to unify progressives and the rest of the party, but the state central committee is an unpredictable group," a political operative close to the party told the Review-Journal after the Saturday vote. "But keep in mind, the (former Senate Majority Leader Harry) Reid machine is not the central committee. It's the operatives, volunteers, fundraising and organizing capacity, all of which can be accomplished outside of the state party organization."
Whitmer seriously ruffled the feathers of the Reid bloc last year, when she defeated then-party chair William McCurdy II to head the state's delegation to the Democratic National Convention, the Review-Journal noted. Her victory was a testament to the strength of the state party's Left Caucus, which Whitmer founded and which similarly played a decisive role in building the grassroots support for Sanders' primary campaign.
However, the staff has not taken the defeat gracefully: every single member soon announced their intent to quit, but not before shifting $450,000 into the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, which will serve as the basis for Cortez Masto's reelection campaign next year, party sources told The Hill.

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Photos: Mysterious Airfield Construction Spotted on Yemeni Island Formerly Controlled by UAE by Morgan Artyukhina
Although the United Arab Emirates formally left the war in Yemen in 2019, its deep ties to nearly 100,000 militia fighters and the Southern Transitional Council have ensured it will continue to exert considerable influence on the conduct of the war as it enters its sixth year.

Satellite photos have revealed construction of an airfield on an island at the mouth of the Red Sea. While its occupancy is presently unknown, the island was once under the control of the United Arab Emirates, which recently closed its base across the waterway.
Citing photos taken by Planet Labs' Earth imaging satellites, the Drive's the War Zone reported on Tuesday that a roughly 6,150-foot-long runway was under construction on Perim, also known as Mayyun, an island that straddles the Bab al-Mandab, the narrow strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean beyond.

According to the outlet's analysis, the construction began on the airstrip sometime last month. The soon-to-be airtstrip is about 165 feet wide and 6,150 feet long - large enough to handle heavy cargo transport aircraft that would be used to ferry war materiel such as armored vehicles, trucks, and munitions. However, they note that a past project by the United Arab Emirates attempted to build an even longer 10,000-foot runway in 2016, the remains of which can still be seen in the satellite photos. It's unclear why the new effort doesn't make sure of the old right-of-way.
According to the blog Intel Lab, the new facility is Emirati as well, although it's unclear why exactly they think so.
At the start of the Yemen War in 2015, the island was controlled by the Houthis, who were quickly evicted by Gulf Arab forces allied with Saudi Arabia and the government of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, who was forced from power by the Houthis in early 2015. The Emiratis likewise established a base across the Red Sea at Assab, Eritrea, in late 2015 to ferry heavy weaponry into Yemen as well as allied forces from Sudan, and they also temporarily occupied Yemen's Socotra, a picturesque island off the easternmost tip of Africa that is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
During its occupation, the UAE established a detention facility on Perim, according to Qatar-based Al Jazeera. Later in the war, after Abu Dhabi began its preparations for withdrawal in 2019, Saudi forces moved into garrison Perim Island, along with Yemeni security forces.
Last month it was reported that Abu Dhabi was dismantling its base in Assab, and according to Intel Lab, the base's functions are being relocated to Perim. With its location just a dozen miles from Africa and sitting astride one of the world's busiest sea lanes, Perim provides a commanding position from which to both exert influence and collect information. Intel Lab noted that the facility could be used to house signals intelligence instruments as well as prevent blockades of the strait, in addition to taking over Assab's role as a logistics hub.
Perim has historically been garrisoned by naval powers for just such reasons, including the Portuguese, British, and Ottoman Empires, as well as the United Arab Republic and the Soviet Union.

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White House: Joe Biden to 'Appoint Someone' to Lead Implementation of COVID Relief Bill
by Morgan Artyukhina

Implementation of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the United States' massive COVID-19 relief package, will be overseen by a special appointee of US President Joe Biden, the White House has announced.
As the US House of Representatives voted on final passage of the huge $1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package on Wednesday, the White House moved to address questions of how it would be implemented. Press Secretary Jen Psaki noted Biden would appoint a tsar to oversee dispersal of the funds to the many programs it will fuel. These include support for vaccination programs, enhancing safety measures for schools preparing to reopen for classes, health insurance subsidies, child tax credits, funding for food stamps, as well as direct cash payments to American families, among other provisions.
Psaki also noted Biden would sign the bill into law on Friday, at which time he will embark on a tour of the US to promote the plan and its many details. "Passage and signing of the bill is just the beginning," she said.
Answering a question about whether the stimulus checks will have Biden's name on them, as those sent out by then-US President Donald Trump did, Psaki further noted that he "didn't think that was a priority ... His focus was on getting them out as quickly as possible."
The House vote on Wednesday fell almost exclusively along party lines, with Republicans raising fears the bill would lead to an increase in taxes, as well as other more common objections to welfare programs, such as that they will encourage recipients not to seek employment.
In a statement following its passage, Biden said the bill was "about giving the backbone of this nation - the essential workers, the working people who built this country, the people who keep this country going - a fighting chance."
"Help is here," he said in a separate tweet.

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China's Second Type 055 Stealthy Missile Cruiser, Lhasa, Enters Service
by Morgan Artyukhina

The Chinese navy's rapid pace of modernization and growth has sent panic through US naval leaders, who have pushed for progressively larger fleet construction goals in an attempt to avoid being left in the dust by Beijing, whom Washington considers a "pacing threat."
The second of China's huge Type 055 guided missile cruisers has officially been commissioned into the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the service recently announced. The advanced warship is the largest combat vessel in Asia and the second-largest destroyer on the planet.
Chinese media has reported that a second Type 055 destroyer has been added to the PLAN and christened Lhasa, after the capital of Tibet Autonomous Region, and given the hull number 102. The ceremony took place at a naval base in Qingdao, but it is unclear the exact date it occurred.
Lhasa joined the Nanchang, which was commissioned in January 2020, but there are another six ships of the class in various stages of fitting out. The vessels weigh in at 13,000 tons of

displacement when fully loaded, making them the largest such warshipsin Asia and only second to the US Navy's Zumwalt-class warship, which are not yet in service. The Russian Navy also sports two of the Kirov-class missile cruisers, which the US considers to be battlecruisers due to their huge 28,000-ton displacement.
Among their formidable armaments are a variety of long-range anti-air, anti-ship and land strike missiles mounted in 112 missile tubes, as well as the new Harbin Z-20 helicopter, which can pursue its own anti-ship and anti-submarine missions. The Type 055s are expected to serve as primary escorts for the PLAN's aircraft carriers, the third of which is expected sometime this year.
Lhasa is also equipped with a powerful dual-band radar that's capable not only of detecting stealth aircraft, but can track satellites in orbit as well. American cruisers can also track satellites, and even carry the SM-3 missile, which was used in 2008 to shoot down a satellite in Operation Burnt Frost.
Other new Chinese warships, such as the Type 052DL, also carry the dual-band stealth-penetrating radar, which utilizes a meter-long wave to beat the technology. However, it isn't nearly as precise as shorter-wave radars.

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Texas Attorney General Threatens to Sue Austin City Government to Drop Mask Mandate
by Morgan Artyukhina

After Texas Governor Greg Abbott announced last week the state's mask mandate would be lifted, US President Joe Biden derided his move as undermining hard-won gains against the coronavirus, calling Abbott's actions "Neanderthal thinking."
Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has threatened to sue the government of the state's capital, the city of Austin, if its mayor doesn't lower the city's mask mandate and other COVID-19 related restrictions in line with previous dictates by the Lone Star State's governor.
"The decision to require masks or otherwise impose COVID-19-related operating limits is expressly reserved to private businesses on their own premises. It does not rest with jurisdictions like the city of Austin or Travis County or their local health authorities," Paxton fumed in a Wednesday letter to Austin Mayor Steve Adler and Travis County Judge Andy Brown that was posted to Twitter.
"We have already taken you to court under similar circumstances. You lost. If you continue to flout the law in this manner, we'll take you to court again and you'll lose again," Paxton said, adding that Adler had until 6 pm on Wednesday to comply or "on behalf of the state of Texas, I will sue you."
Last week, Texas Governor Greg Abbott ordered the state's mandate to wear protective facemasks in order to limit the spread of COVID-19 to be lifted along with any restrictions on the maximum capacity of indoor facilities, including restaurants, claiming that medical advances have ostensibly limited deaths from the disease. However, he still urged Texans to "not abandon safe practices."

Texas has suffered the third-largest number of deaths from COVID-19 of any US state, with 45,795 people dying of the disease.
In response to Abott's move, service industry workers staged a protest outside the Texas Capitol on Monday, demanding greater protections, including an increased rate of vaccination and the retention of the mask mandate.
"In addition to us now facing an increased risk of COVID-19 exposure, we now face increased risk of violence and abuse from customers who will not adhere to our store policies to continue mask policies until the CDC [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] advises us they are no longer needed," a joint statement by the convening groups said.
Adler has also sharply criticized Abbott's approach, telling Fox News that by removing the mandate, officials were creating "ambiguity."
"There are many people in the state that are hearing that as a message that masking doesn't work, it's not effective, or that we're past concern on the virus. And that ambiguity and communication is what I have the biggest issue with," Adler said.
However, Dr. Mark Escott, the Austin Public Health Interim Health Authority Dr. Mark Escott, said on Tuesday that the area will remain rated at "Stage 4," during which lifting such safeguards is considered too risky. According to data from the state's health department, on Wednesday there were 3,104 new confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus, and 4,556 people in the hospital from the disease.

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Military Base Reportedly Targeted by Missile in Suburbs of Marib, Yemen
by Gaby Arancibia

Latest strikes in the region came nearly a week after Houthi militants claimed control over the majority of Marib, a strategic city which is the largest in northern Yemen that also serves as the capital of the oil-rich governorate.
A missile strike has reportedly struck a military installation located on the outskirts of Marib, Yemen, prompting a rush of first responders to the area.
Citing two local residents, Reuters reported on Wednesday that the targeted base includes the building of the ministry of defense, and is situated near several residential areas.
It's unclear if the missile strike resulted in any injuries or fatalities.
A subsequent report by released by Saudi State TV indicated that the Saudi-led coalition later destroyed a so-called "hostile aerial target" that was allegedly fired by Houthi militants based in Marib. The projectile was identified as a SAM-6 missile.
The strike follows recent reports that the Saudi-coalition reportedly destroyed two ballistic missiles that were launched last week toward the Saudi port city of Jizan after an attack was launched against the Saudi city of Khamis Mushait that involved two explosive-laden drones.
The recent uptick in strikes in the region followed claims by Yemen's Houthis that it had managed to take control of 10 of Marib's 14 districts. However, the claim itself has been

challenged by former Al-Masdar News Journalist Ali Al-Sakani, who alleges that had in fact only gained control of five districts, two of which had been in their control since 2015.
The onset of the ongoing crisis in Yemen has prompted the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Yemenis, and has only hindered access to food, potable water and life-saving medical treatment. The devastating conflict also comes as the Middle Eastern country is dealing with a severe cholera outbreak that has infected millions and killed thousands. Yemen's health care system has been ravaged by the war.

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Arkansas Governor Signs Legislation Banning Nearly All Abortions Within State
by Gaby Arancibia

The recent passage of Arkansas' Senate Bill 6 (SB6) marks the Land of Opportunity as one of at least 14 US states where lawmakers have put forth legislation outlining a near complete ban of abortions. The bill is designed to challenge the landmark Roe v. Wade decision, and is expected to be met with strong opposition before being implemented.
Arkansas' Republican Gov. Asa Hutchinson signed into law one of the strictest measures barring abortions in the state on Tuesday, a bill conservatives hope will force the US Supreme Court to revist its 1973 decision that legalized the procedure.
Under the restrictive measure, abortions would only be allowed in Arkansas in cases where it's necessary in order to save the life or preserve the health of the fetus or the mother. It does not provide any exception for situations involving rape or incest.
Medical professionals who either perform or attempt to perform an abortion would be charged with an unclassified felony, with a conviction requiring the official to either face a prison sentence or a fine of up to $100,000.
The legislation will not take effect until 90 days after the state legislature adjourns, suggesting the bill cannot be enforced until sometime this summer. During that period, pro-choice supporters are expected to strongly oppose the measure, forcing the newly-signed bill to be challenged through the court system.
Hutchinson touched on the possible legal outcome in a recent statement, acknowledging that the "intent of the legislation [is] to set the stage for the Supreme Court overturning current case law." Conservative lawmakers believe that the Trump administration's packing of the Supreme Court will help to support their push to review the current abortion laws in place.
"I will sign SB6 because of overwhelming legislative support and my sincere and long-held pro-life convictions," Hutchinson noted in his release, before underscoring that he had hoped the bill would include exceptions for cases of rape and incest.
Over the past two years, similar legislative measures have been taken up in Alabama, Ohio and Georgia, but were ultimately struck down by federal courts.
Holly Dickenson, the executive director of the Arkansas branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, issued her own statement on the development, calling the bill "cruel" and "unconstitutional" as it will do nothing more than "cause stress for patients."

"Governor Hutchinson: we'll see you in court," she concluded.

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Photos: Ivanka Trump Makes First Post-White House Appearance With Controversial Preacher by Gaby Arancibia

Paula White is an American televangelist who was appointed by former US President Donald Trump to serve as an adviser to his administration's evangelical advisory board. Despite the post and preacher role, White, who was the first woman to deliver a presidential invocation, isn't without her own controversial troubles.

Ivanka Trump, the second-eldest child of the former commander-in-chief, was recently spotted in Florida making her very first public appearance since departing the White House grounds earlier this year.

Citing sources familiar with the appearance, Fox News reported Trump attended an event on Tuesday to help deliver boxes of food in Apopka, Florida, that were assembled as part of the "Farmers to Families" program launched by her father.

The food program was implemented in April 2020 under the Trump administration's Coronavirus Food Assistance Program that helped farmers and Americans struggling to make end's meet amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the time, the program itself made headline news after many of the packages delivered by vendors included a personalized letter from the one-time president in both English and Spanish that underscored that the goods were made possible at his direction. The correspondence raised both legal and ethical questions.

During the distribution event, Trump helped to deliver some 1,300 boxes, some of which were sent to the homes of local residents who were unable to retrieve the assistance in person. Trump also helped disperse aid to The Lifeboat Project, a local shelter for survivors of human trafficking.

In a post shared on Instagram, the shelter issued a statement that indicated Tuesday proved to be a "beautiful day to put politics aside … and let faith and truth be our topic of connection."

"We had the opportunity to fill the room with global leaders and have a conversation about our growing world model," the post read. "We thank all levels of government, community leaders, and our partnered agencies that made today happen."

"It was the beginning of acknowledging truth and showing that faith always overcomes fear," it added.

The post also included photos of Trump meeting with officials of the shelter. However, among the group of community leaders was none other than Paula White, who noted in her own respective social media post that boxes were distributed to over 4,000 families during the day's festivities.

Over the years, White has raised eyebrows over a variety of remarks, many of which ranged between anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ, as she spread a brand of Christianity often referred to as "prosperity theology." The belief is that God rewards faith with financial blessings.

However, White's beliefs turned heads in 2018 when she claimed that although Jesus was a refugee, he was "not illegal." She went on to say that "if he had broken the law, then he would have been sinful and he would not have been our messiah."

The remarks came as the spotlight fell on the booming immigration crisis at the US-Mexico border, and as the Trump administration faced backlash over its family separation policy. To date, several hundred children have yet to be reunited with their family.

At one point, White's outlandish claims were blasted in 2016 by Russell Moore, the president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. Moore called White a "charlatan," adding that she was "recognized as a heretic by every orthodox Christian, of whatever tribe."

Three years after Moore's critiques, Richard Painter, who served as the chief ethics lawyer for former US President George W. Bush, took his own shot by accusing White of running a "Ponzi scheme" through her prosperity gospel teachings. In a 2019 tweet, Painter stated that White tested the "boundaries between 'religious freedom' and criminal mail fraud and wire fraud."

"'Send me money and God will make you rich,'" he wrote. "Now she uses her White House position to make her sales pitch."

White has been largely criticized for trying to sell religious items to followers with the promise that they will be rewarded either spiritually or materially. In early 2018, White even called on her supporters to send their first paychecks of the year to support her ministry, warning that those who did not submit would face "consequences" from God.

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Apple Reportedly Rejects Parler's App Store Appeal, Cites Platform's 'Objectionable Content' by Gaby Arancibia

Alternative social media platform Parler was booted off the Apple App Store in early January, in the wake of the violent Capitol riot that claimed the lives of several individuals, including law enforcement officials. The platform came under fire for its ineffective moderation efforts on violent content.

Apple recently informed Parler that its appeal to return to the company's online application store was rejected, on the basis that the social media platform has failed to meet the company's content moderation standards.

A February 25 message issued to Parler by Apple indicates that the new community guidelines the platform released on February 15 in an effort to come back onto the app store were insufficient.

Obtained by Bloomberg News, the letter to Amy Peikoff, Parler's chief policy officer, includes a variety of screenshots as evidence that offensive posts remain rampant on the platform. Some images show user profile pictures with white nationalist imagery and posts that include misogynistic, homophobic and racist commentary.

"As you know, developers are required to implement robust moderation capabilities to proactively identify, prevent and filter this objectionable content to protect the health and safety of users," the letter reportedly states.

"In fact, simple searches reveal highly objectionable content, including easily identified offensive uses of derogatory terms regarding race, religion and sexual orientation, as well as Nazi symbols."
Apple went on to explain that "for these reasons your app cannot be returned to the App Store for distribution until it complies with the guidelines."
"There is no place for hateful, racist, discriminatory content on the App Store," the company underscored.
Parler's current community standards indicate that it will ban users from its platform when individuals post spam, use bots, or tap the social media site as a "tool for crime, civil torts, or other unlawful acts."
However, the company still maintains permissive policies when compared against other social media platforms. In fact, its stated goal highlights that "removing users or user-provided content be kept to the absolute minimum."
Citing an individual familiar with the development, Bloomberg also reported that Parler ended its ties with three iOS developers, and that it had parted ways with seven employees composed of contractors and staffers.
Parler was temporarily shuttered after Apple and Google booted the company off their respective app stores, and tech giant Amazon cut the platform from its web-hosting services. However, the company did manage to relaunch itself after gaining support from cloud hosting company SkySilk Inc.
Earlier, amid its ongoing legal battles with Big Tech companies, John Matze, who previously served as Parler's chief executive officer, remarked in a mid-January interviewthat he believed it was possible Parler may "never" return after vendors had jumped ship.

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Hawai'i Governor Declares State of Emergency as Islands Brace for Further 'Severe Weather'
by Evan Craighead

Evacuation orders were issued earlier this week for several areas of Hawai'i, including the islands of O'ahu and Maui, as heavy rainfall brought destructive flash flooding and surging waters. As of this article's publication, no related deaths have been reported.
Democratic Hawai'i Governor David Ige signed an emergency proclamation Tuesday to address the "extensive damage to both public and private property across the islands."
He also highlighted on Twitter that more inclement weather is expected to reach the islands before the week is over.
"The emergency proclamation makes state general funds available that can be used quickly and efficiently to help those impacted by the severe weather, which is expected to continue until Friday," the governor tweeted, linking to the proclamation.
Honolulu County and Maui County - both hit particularly hard by heavy rains - will receive emergency funds, as well as the counties of Hawai'i, Kalawao and Kaua'i, according to the proclamation.

Haleiwa, a city on Honolulu County's O'ahu island, received an evacuation order Tuesday as heavy, torrential rains pounded the area on-and-off for hours.
"CATASTROPHIC FLOODING FROM OPAEULA STREAM: EVACUATE NOW from Haleiwa," read a Tuesday tweet from the The O'ahu Emergency Management.
The order was lifted around 11:30 p.m. local time, approximately seven hours after it was issued, according to Hawai'i News Now.
"It was kind of dry and then all of a sudden!" a Haleiwa couple told Hawai'i News Now. "We thought we were gonna be OK and the next minute it was on our stoop and another few minutes it was going to be in the house."
Storms and flood-waters in Maui County "heavily damaged" Kaupakalua Bridge and "destroyed" Peahi Bridge, according to a Tuesday release. Power outages were also reported within the county.
"This has been unprecedented flooding, and we will be making damage assessments today," Maui County Mayor Michael Victorino said in the release. "I ask everyone to stay vigilant and be safe."

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US Senate Confirms Michael Regan to Head Environmental Protection Agency
by Evan Craighead

Every Democratic senator, and 16 Republican senators, voted in favor of confirming 45-year-old environmental regulator Michael Regan as the next administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Regan is notably the first Black man to hold the role since the federal agency's formation in 1970.
Regan, who served as secretary of North Carolina's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) since 2017, was confirmed to lead the EPA with a 66-34 vote on Wednesday.
"Under Donald Trump, the EPA weakened environmental protections, fudged the science, completely ignored climate change—to potentially disastrous effect, unfortunately," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) said on the Senate floor Wednesday, prior to confirmation votes.
The US Senate also confirmed Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-OH) as secretary of Housing and Urban Development, with a 66-34 vote, and US Court of Appeals Judge Merrick Garland as attorney general of the US Department of Justice, with a 70-30 vote.
"It is high time the Senate confirm someone like Michael Regan, who has made environmental protection the cause of his career, to lead the agency and set it back on its proper footing," Schumer added.
This will not be Regan's first time with the federal environmental agency, as he previously served on the EPA's air quality and energy programs during the administrations of both US President Bill Clinton and US President George W. Bush.
Prior to being nominated and confirmed to join US President Joe Biden's cabinet, Regan focused primarily on air quality and other environmental issues in North Carolina.

"As DEQ secretary, Regan oversees the state agency whose mission is to protect North Carolina's environment and natural resources," his NC cabinet biography read. "The organization has offices from the mountains to the coast and administers regulatory and public assistance programs aimed at protecting the quality of North Carolina's air, water and land, its coastal fisheries, and the public's health."
US President Joe Biden said in December that he is confident Regan will be prepared to tackle the "undeniable, accelerating, punishing reality of climate change"
Regan also founded M. Regan & Associates, LLC., "a firm dedicated to helping organizations find transformational solutions to complex energy, environmental and economic challenges," according to Regan's biography.

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'Written in Hell by The Devil Himself': Republican Senator Slams Democrats' Voting Rights Bill by Evan Craighead

The 'For the People Act,' or H.R.1, passed by a 220-210 party-line vote in the US House of Representatives last week. Republicans who voted against the proposed legislation, which seeks to implement same-day voter registration, claim the bill is a partisan ploy to boost Democrats' power in Washington.
Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT) railed against the proposed voting rights legislation during a Wednesday "Fox & Friends" broadcast, claiming "everything in this is rotten to the core."
"This is a bill as if written in hell by the devil himself," the GOP lawmaker said. "This takes all sorts of decisions the federal government really has no business making."
In addition to the nationwide implementation of same-day, automatic voter registration, the bill also seeks to conditionally restore the voting rights of felons and to limit gerrymandering.
Lee told the outlet that the bill appears to be "an effort to ensure an institutionally, revolutionary-democratic party of sorts."
The GOP lawmaker argued that Democrats are trying to use the bill to "remain in power for many decades to come."
"It does this by taking away these decisions. Elections in America have always been conducted at the state and local levels," Lee said.
Rep. Paul Tonko (D-NY), who voted in favor of the bill on March 3, argued in a same-day news release that the proposed voting rights legislation was necessary during a time when "foreign adversaries continue to attack our elections."
"After four years of denials and lies from the last administration, we are committed to advancing this legislation that will root out corruption in Washington and work to ensure the voices and votes of every American are heard and respected," he added.
"Senate Democrats are committed to advancing real solutions and fighting to uphold the core tenets of our constitution," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) said in January, announcing the Senate's version of the voting rights bill.

"This legislation will bring about long-needed democracy reforms that will ensure that government is finally able to respond to the pressing needs of the American people. Anyone who believes in a government by the people and for the people should support this important legislation."
"This is a landmark piece of legislation that is urgently needed," US President Joe Biden said Sunday. "I hope the Senate does its work so I can sign it into law."
Nevertheless, the bill is still awaiting consideration in the Senate, which is presently composed of 50 Republican and 50 Democratic lawmakers.
Sen. Bill Hagerty (R-TN) also spoke out against the bill during a Wednesday Fox News appearance, telling "America Reports" host John Roberts that Republicans are counting on Sens. Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) to "keep their word to maintain the filibuster."
"As long as the filibuster rule stays in place, this will not become law," he added.

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Ex-US Youth Soccer Official Pleads Guilty in Visa Fraud Conspiracy - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - A former official for a US youth soccer organization pleaded guilty to visa fraud conspiracy, the Justice Department said in a release.
"The former Chief Operating Officer of Global Premier Soccer (GPS), a now defunct youth soccer organization formerly based in Waltham, Mass., was charged today in connection with a wide-ranging visa fraud conspiracy," the release said on Wednesday.
From 2016 to 2019, the release said, Justin Capell and his co-conspirators submitted fraudulent petitions to immigration officials on behalf of at least seven professional soccer teams to secure visas for GPS's foreign coaching staff.
Capell faces a sentence of up to 5 years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of $250,000, the release added.
According to the US federal criminal law, the conspirators are presumed innocent unless and until, proven guilty.

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US Companies in South Interested in Working With Russia Despite Sanctions - Consul General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The businesses in the south of the United States are interested in the Russian market despite the western sanctions against Moscow, Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.

"The American business community has an interest in the promising and large Russian market," Zakharov said. "Suffice it to note that until 2013-2014. the states of the South of the United States accounted for about 24-27% of the annual Russian-American trade turnover."
Zakharov noted that the leading sectors of the economy of the states of the consular district are energy, including the service component, agriculture, and transport. The Consul General stressed that fruitful bilateral business cooperation used to develop in these areas.
"Speaking about trade and economic cooperation, one cannot but touch upon the topic of Washington's unilateral economic sanctions," Zakharov said. "Now businessmen in the South of the United States have to concentrate their efforts exclusively in areas that are not subject to restrictive measures. The priority spheres of bilateral relations include healthcare, information technology, education, green energy, municipal management, and tourism."
Relations between Russia and the United States deteriorated in 2014 under then-US President Barack Obama during the crisis in Ukraine, when Washington meddled in Ukraine's affairs while accusing Moscow of the same and imposed sanctions. Since then, the United States has expanded and tightened the sanctions regime following accusations of Russia's alleged meddling in the 2016 US presidential election.
Russia has repeatedly denied interfering in Ukraine and in the US political system.

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US Death Rate Jumped 15% in 2020, Making it Deadliest Year in American History - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States had its deadliest year in history last year after the novel coronavirus pandemic caused a 15 percent increase in the US death rate, Politico reported citing two senior US administration officials.
The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention will announce the results, the report said on Wednesday.
CDC data shows there were 344,851 total deaths in 2020 due to covid.

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US Told Russian Diplomats to Be Vaccinated on General Basis - Consul General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States officials told the Russian diplomats to be vaccinated on a general basis, Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.
"The official position of the host country is that foreign diplomats accredited in the United States must be vaccinated on a general basis," he said. "Vaccinations are currently available in Houston for people over the age of 65 or for people over the age of 60 with certain medical

conditions. So we are waiting for our turn or guide employees to vaccinate in Russia during the vacation period."
The Russian Foreign Ministry has offered a number of embassies a chance to get inoculated against the coronavirus with Russia's vaccine, and some of the diplomats have already done so.
The United States continues to be the world leader in terms of both number of cases (29.1 million) and deaths (more than 528,000), according to Johns Hopkins University.
The White House announced at the end of February that Biden has renewed the US Declaration of National Emergency for the coronavirus pandemic.

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Russian Mission in Houston to Resume Off-Site Consular Work When Conditions Allow - Consul

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Russian diplomatic mission in Houston, Texas, stands ready to restart its mobile consular sessions once the epidemiological situation allows it, Russian Consul General Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.
"The demand for mobile sessions is obvious. For our part, we are ready for this," Zakharov said. "In December, we managed to organize one in Dallas... We hope that as more and more people are vaccinated, coronavirus infection rates will decline and we will be able to return to the practice of regular mobile sessions."
Zakharov pointed out that the Consulate General is now receiving numerous requests for consular services from compatriots living in the US states of Colorado, Arizona and Missouri.
"The main problem - in the context of the ongoing pandemic and the need for social distancing - is to obtain permission from the local authorities to conduct such events," Zakharov said.
The White House announced in the end of February that President Joe Biden has renewed the US Declaration of National Emergency for the coronavirus pandemic.

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Russian Nationals in US Unaffected by Recent Storm - Consul General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Russian nationals currently in the United States have not been affected by the recent abnormal weather in several states, Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.
"We immediately asked the local competent authorities if there were Russians among the victims of the cold weather, where they were, and how we could help," Zakharov said. "There were no reports of affected Russian citizens."
Zakharov said the greatest inconvenience to compatriots was caused only by the postponement of the registration for receiving consular services, primarily due to the cancellation or change of flights during the crisis week.

"Applicants from other cities were given the opportunity, on a priority basis, to reschedule their appointments to the nearest dates," he said.
A severe winter storm hit several US states, of which Texas was particularly heavily affected, more than three weeks ago and caused prolonged power outages as well as food and water shortages for millions of residents amid the Arctic cold blast.

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Winter Storm in Texas Affected Work of Russian Diplomatic Mission - Consul General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The recent winter storm in the US state of Texas impacted the work of the Russian diplomatic mission there, but the mission is now operating normally, Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.
When asked how the severely cold weather in Texas affected the work of the Consulate General, Zakharov said, "It would probably be incorrect to talk about the difficulties of the Consulate General - after all, millions of Texans were in distress."
Zakharov said the Russian mission faced interruptions in electricity and water supply, heating, telephone and Internet services for a couple of days.
"But already on February 16, our mission resumed its work in normal mode, and now we provide a full range of consular services," Zakharov added.
A severe winter storm hit several US states a month ago, particularly affecting Texas. The storm caused power outages as well as food and water shortages for millions of residents amid the Arctic cold blast.

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Russian Consul General Does Not See Big Changes in Contacts With US Under Biden
WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik there have been no meaningful changes in the diplomatic mission's contacts with US officials after President Joe Biden assumed office.
"There are no significant changes in terms of contacts with officials after the arrival of the new administration," Zakharov said. "Nevertheless, meetings at various levels continue, for example, with state secretaries who are responsible for international relations, mayors of cities, representatives of the business community."
Zakharov explained the Consulate General uses its contacts with state and municipal authorities - branches of the federal agencies and primarily the US State Department, but also immigration and law enforcement agencies, as well as state secretaries and the mayors - to solve more "specialized" problems.

"The attitude toward Russian diplomats varies, but one cannot say that it is biased," he said. "Perhaps, the anti-Russian rhetoric, artificially whipped up over the years, is balanced here by the traditional southern hospitality."
However, Zakharov emphasized that cooperation between Russia and the United States at the inter-regional level continues to develop, and there are active contacts between the cities of Moscow and Houston.
"In particular, in February 2020, the delegation of the Moscow government visited Houston," he said. "Within the framework of the visit, the pavilion 'Welcome to Moscow!' the famous 'Houston Rodeo' was opened and one of the days during the event was renamed 'Day of Russia.' An agreement in principle was reached to hold such events on a regular basis, and a decision was made to preserve the status of a consulting partner of the Moscow International Medical Cluster (MMK) by the Houston Medical Center. Tyumen and the regions in the Urals are trying to keep up with the capital."
Zakharov noted that the vast majority of events until now had to be held virtually. In June 2020, a video conference "Virtual business mission Ural-Texas," was held in which Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov took part.
Similarly, a "Moscow-Houston" teleconference was organized in December to address the problems of developing tourism in the post-pandemic period, he said, adding that the Iowa-Stavropol twin-city teleconference is currently being organized.
"In general, there are many interesting plans and ideas, we hope that all of them will be implemented," he said.
Zakharov expressed hope that once the situation with respect to the novel coronavirus outbreak improves, mutual visits will resume.

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Legal Battle Expected Between State, Local Officials in Texas Over Mask Mandate

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Local officials in the city of Austin, Texas, are preparing for a legal battle against state Attorney General Ken Paxton after they refused to obey an executive order to lift a statewide mask mandate, City Council member Gregorio Casar said in a statement.
"While El Paso rolled out makeshift morgues, you sued them for protecting residents. While Texans froze in the dark, you fled the state for warmer weather. Now, you're going out of your way (again) to win political points, even if it costs lives. We'll see you in court," Casar said on Wednesday.
Earlier on Wednesday, Paxton threatened Austin Mayor Steve Adler and Travis County Judge Andy Brown with legal action if they did not fully comply with Governor Greg Abbott's executive order.
"You and your local health authorities have until 6:00 pm (Central Time) today to rescind any local mask mandates or business-operating restrictions, retract any related public statements,

and come into full compliance with GA-34. Otherwise, on behalf of the State of Texas, I will sue you," Paxton said in a letter to the local officials on Wednesday.
On Wednesday, the state of Texas lifted a statewide mask mandate and allowed all businesses to operate at 100 percent with no public-health restrictions required.
Abbott's executive order includes a provision that would require public-health measures to snap back on again if the number of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in Texas counties reach dangerous levels.
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci said in an interview that Texas is inviting a new surge in COVID-19 cases with the easing of mitigation measures.

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Russian Diplomats Often Wait 1 Year or More to Get US Visa - Consul General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - It often takes up to a year for a Russian diplomat nowadays to receive a visa to the United States, while Washington also denies renewals of their permits to stay, Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.
"It concerns not only the personnel of our Consulate General, but also Russian diplomats in general in the United States.... for several years now, the Consulate General has been functioning with an incomplete staffing precisely because of the tough visa policy of our American colleagues. It has become common to wait for visas for a year or more, while the result is not guaranteed," he said. "What is even more alarming, the host country is now not only delaying the issuance of visas to new employees, but also refusing to renew the permits to stay for employees of the Russian foreign missions already in the United States."
It turns out, Zakharov added, that if any of his colleagues find themselves in urgent need to travel to Russia, whether on an official or personal occasion, they can no longer enter America. It is kind of a "one way ticket" in the middle of a business trip, he added.Zakharov added that The people now have to return to Russia without having their replacements, which has a very negative effect on the ability to effectively fulfill the tasks assigned to the diplomatic mission.
"We hope that the American side will reconsider its position and return to constructive negotiations on visa issues," the Consul General stated.
Zakharov also reminded about the impact of the closure by Washington of the two Russian Consulates in 2017 and 2018.
"To our deep regret, the unfounded demand of the American side to close first the Russian Consulate General in San Francisco and then in Seattle impacted, first of all, our compatriots living in the west and northwest of the United States," he explained. "Now, in order to receive consular services, they have to come either to the Embassy in Washington, or to us in Houston. And this is both time and money."
Moreover, Zakharov continued to say, the redistribution of the applicant flows led to a sharp increase in the load on the Consulate General.
"Thus, the number of consular actions performed by us has almost doubled compared to 2017," he revealed.

"Since we have raised this topic, I would like to dispel one of the common misconceptions among our compatriots," he added. "Communicating with visitors or browsing social networks, we sometimes encounter righteous indignation, they say, how is it possible in such a large country to have only three missions abroad, because it is difficult for people to get to you, they have to wait a long time for an appointment, why were the consulates general closed? I would like to note once again that the decision to terminate the activities of Russian diplomatic missions in San Francisco and Seattle was made by the American side, while de facto seizing diplomatic property from Russia."

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Texas Interested in Studying Russian Low Temperatures Infrastructure - Consul General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Russia stood ready to offer help to the US states of Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana amid the recent severe winter storm, however, the authorities said they did not need additional aid but expressed interest in studying the Russian experience of building infrastructure adapted for low temperatures, Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.

"Guided by humanitarian considerations, we asked the authorities of the most affected states - Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana - whether they plan to turn to foreign countries for help, noting that if such an official appeal is received, the Russian side would be ready to consider it promptly," Zakharov said. "The partners responded that they do not need additional resources, but they are extremely interested in studying the Russian experience in building infrastructure adapted to low temperatures."

Zakharov said it was paradoxical for Texas, often called the "energy capital" of the United States, to experience a true energy crisis during the February 14-19 winter storm.

"A sharp drop in air temperature - on the night of February 16, the thermometer dropped to an unprecedented for these places -19 degrees Celsius - caused widespread disruptions to critical infrastructure, especially electricity and water supplies," he said.

Zakharov pointed out that these conditions, coupled with ice on the roads, contributed to food and fuel shortages despite advance warnings about the upcoming bad weather. In addition, power plants, networks and the responsible regulatory bodies were not entirely prepared for the abnormal weather conditions.

"A series of technical failures led to the loss of electricity for several days for more than 5 million residents, the pumps of water pumping stations stopped. With the power outage, there was no heat in the houses either," he said.

Zakharov also said some residents tried to warm up in garages by starting their car engines, or burning coal inside their houses that in some cases led to tragic consequences.

"The death toll in the state reached at least 40 people, and the economic damage, according to various estimates, is from $20 to 45 billion," he said. "By now, life has practically returned to its normal course, the work is underway to repair water supply systems, and to restore other damaged infrastructure."

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"It concerns not only the personnel of our Consulate General, but also Russian diplomats in general in the United States.... for several years now, the Consulate General has been functioning with an incomplete staffing precisely because of the tough visa policy of our American colleagues. It has become common to wait for visas for a year or more, while the result is not guaranteed," he said. "What is even more alarming, the host country is now not only delaying the issuance of visas to new employees, but also refusing to renew the permits to stay for employees of the Russian foreign missions already in the United States."
It turns out, Zakharov added, that if any of his colleagues find themselves in urgent need to travel to Russia, whether on an official or personal occasion, they can no longer enter America. It is kind of a "one way ticket" in the middle of a business trip, he added.

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Texas Interested in Studying Russian Infrastructure for Low Temperatures - Consul General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The US states of Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana, recently affected by severe winter storms, are interested in studying the Russian experience in building infrastructure adapted to low temperatures, Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.
"They are extremely interested in studying the Russian experience in building infrastructure adapted to low temperatures," Zakharov said.

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Russia Stood Ready to Help Texas Amid Storm But Was Told No Aid Needed - Consul General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Russia stood ready to provide assistance during the severe winter storm that recently hit the US states of Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana, but the states' authorities responded by saying they did not need any additional help, Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.

"Guided by humanitarian considerations, we asked the authorities of the most affected states - Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana - whether they plan to turn to foreign countries for help, noting that if such an official appeal is received, Russia would be ready to consider it promptly," Zakharov said. "The partners responded that they do not need additional resources."

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Canadian COVID-19 Spending to Drop by 86% in 2022 - Watchdog

TORONTO, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government's COVID-19-related spending is set to drop by 86 percent in the next fiscal year, the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer said in a report.
"As we transition away from the early days of the global pandemic, planned expenditures for the Government's response to COVID-19 are beginning to decline. In the 2021-22 Main Estimates, C$22.7 billion [US$18 billion] of spending authorities relate to COVID-19. This compares to C$159.5 billion [US$126.41 billion] of the 2020-21 Estimates to date," the report said on Wednesday.
As a result, the Department of Finance, Department of Employment and Social Development and the Public Health Agency will all have their budgets slashed in the next fiscal year, with the latter two having their funding cut by more than half.
Despite the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau passing legislation allowing it sweeping spending powers, it will still have to seek parliamentary approval for $112.46 billion in budgetary authorities.
The Canadian government's lavish spending amid has raised the ire among some opposition parties, with the Conservative Party taking particular aim at the growing deficit under the incumbent Liberal government, which projected to soar to a record-shattering $306.61 billion in fiscal year 2020-21.
Trudeau has rejected opposition criticism, saying that his government had to resort to record-level spending in order to keep Canadians afloat during the pandemic. However, Canada's ability to service debt has also come into question, with Fitch Ratings stripping Canada of its AAA debt rating citing a "deterioration of public finances" in July, and warning of additional downgrades with the fiscal outlook does not improve.

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US Says Turkey Has No Immunity in 2017 Assault on Anti-Erdogan Protesters in Washington

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration said in a court filing that the Turkish government has no immunity in the May 2017 incident when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's security personnel assaulted protesters in Washington.

The Biden administration filed a friend-of-the-court brief in a lawsuit that the affected protesters filed against the Turkish government regarding the assault.
"Here, the district court-having reviewed an extensive body of evidence, including numerous videos of the altercations at issue and declarations from security experts-found that Turkish security personnel 'violently' attacked civilian protesters, including by 'strik[ing] and kick[ing]' protesters who had fallen to the ground, with no reasonable basis for perceiving a threat to President Erdogan," the brief said on Wednesday... On the basis of the district court's factual determinations, however, the United States agrees with its conclusion that Turkey is not immune from these suits."
The court filing, submitted by acting State Department Legal Adviser Richard Visek and acting Assistant US Attorney General Brian Boynton, said the conduct of the Turkish security personnel cannot be regarded as an exercise of the agents' protective function.
Foreign security personnel are immune from prosecution in violent incidents involving civilians as long as they act to protect diplomats and senior officials from threats of bodily harm, but the rule does not apply if foreign security personnel take actions that are unreasonable or serve no protective function, the brief said.
In May 2017, Erdogan's bodyguards attacked a group of Kurdish protesters outside the home of Turkey's ambassador to the United States during the Turkish president's visit to Washington. The incident left 11 people injured, nine of whom were hospitalized.
The State Department said it had contacted Ankara to express its concerns about the altercation, however, Turkey blamed the altercation on the protesters, which it said were supporting the US-outlawed terror group Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

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Military Reservist Sentenced to 6 Years in Jail for Attack on Trudeau Residence - Reports

TORONTO, March 10 (Sputnik) - Corey Hurren, a Canadian military reservist who stormed the gates of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's residence, has been sentenced to six years in prison minus time served in detention, CTV News reported.
Hurren, 46, will now spend the next five years in prison after Ontario Court of Justice judge Robert Wadden handed down his decision on Wednesday. Hurren has not expressed remorse for his actions and was deemed to represent an "ongoing risk" by Wadden, as quoted by the report.
On July 2, the Manitoba native drove a pickup truck through the gates of Rideau Hall and was able to gain access to the grounds of Trudeau's residence . The Canadian Rangers reservist was apprehended by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police shortly thereafter.
Last month, Hurren plead guilty to seven weapons charges and one charge of mischief for causing nearly $80,000 worth of damage to the Rideau Hall gate.
Hurren had told investigators that he wanted to confront the prime minister during a press briefing in order to inspire change in the country. Canada's federal police agency said at the

time that neither the prime minister nor Governor General Julie Payette were at the residence during the incident.
Rideau Hall in Ottawa is the official residence of Canada's monarch or the monarch's official representative in Canada, the governor general. Trudeau and his family were moved to the compound in 2015 after renovations began at the official residence of the prime minister.

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Dow Hits Record High 3rd Straight Day on Cheer Over COVID-19 Relief Checks

NEW YORK, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest stock barometer, hit record highs for a third day in a row on Wednesday, as investors cheered benign US inflation data and the imminent arrival of COVID-19 relief checks for Americans.
The Dow, which hit all-time highs on Monday and Tuesday, increased 1.5 percent to close at 32,297, after reaching a peak of 32,390.
The rally in stocks came after the Labor Department reported that the Consumer Price Index grew by just 0.4 percent in February, despite concerns that price pressures may be building a lot faster than wages and employment amid recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.
Wall Street was also spurred by President Joe Biden's $1.9 trillion "American Rescue Plan", which passed the House of Representatives on Wednesday and is due to be signed by him before the end of the week, enabling one-time payments of $1,400 for most US citizens.
The S&P 500, barometer for the top 500 US stocks, rose 0.6 percent to settle at 3,898.
The Nasdaq Composite Index was the laggard of the day, settling flat at 13,068. The index, which consists of heavyweight tech names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, had slumped in recent weeks on concerns about overvaluation in most of its stocks.

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US to Take Action Against 'Egregious' Human Rights Violations in Hong Kong - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to take action against individuals responsible for human rights violations in Hong Kong, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a congressional hearing.
"We need to advise our businesses as well that there are sanctions on the books, that they need to be mindful of if they're operating in Hong Kong, there are certain risks that come along with that," Blinken said on Wednesday. "We will continue to do that and speak out and take action against egregious violations of democracy and human rights in Hong Kong."

Hong Kong experienced over the past two years a series of protests against the city leadership and the central government, accompanied by violent clashes with the police and assaults on state facilities, including the Legislative Council.
In late June 2020, China adopted a law that adjusts security policies in Hong Kong to Beijing's perception of crime and punishment with regard to separatism, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign countries. The law sparked mass protests in Hong Kong, as the critics of the law in China's special administrative region and abroad fear that it may limit Hong Kong's exclusive rights and freedoms.
Meanwhile, China insists the law aims to punish illegal activities in the city without harming the fundamental freedoms of the local population.

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US Acquiring 100Mln More Johnson & Johnson Vaccines to Ensure 'Maximum Flexibility'- Biden

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The US government is purchasing 100 million coronavirus vaccines from Johnson & Johnson above the adequate doses it already has to ensure "maximum flexibility" in responding to the coronavirus pandemic, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.
"I'm directing my HHS team to purchase another 100 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine," Biden said during a televised event on Wednesday. "I'm doing this because in wartime efforts we need maximum flexibility. There's always the chance to encounter unexpected challenges, or will there be a new need for a vaccine effort and a lot that can change and we need to be prepared."
Biden was referring to his team at the Department of Health and Human Services.
The White House has finalized deals with two other vaccine makers, Pfizer and Moderna, for 200 million doses to be delivered by the end of July.
The agreement with Johnson & Johnson would serve as a backstop should Pfizer or Moderna run into manufacturing issues, HHS officials said.
Biden said the United States hit a record with COVID-19 vaccinations on March 6 by immunizing 2.9 million people, and reiterated his administration's goal to have enough doses by the end of May for all Americans.
He also said any additional supply at the end of the US vaccination programs will be used to help other countries.
"We've committed $4 billion to help get the funding for more vaccines around the world," Biden said. "This [virus] is not something that can be stopped by a fence no matter how high you build a fence or a wall. We're not going to be ultimately safe until the world is safe. And so we're going to start off making sure Americans are taken care of first, then the rest of the world."

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Blinken Says Will Raise Issue of Uyghurs in Meeting With Chinese Officials Next Week

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a congressional hearing that he will raise concerns over the treatment of Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang province during a meeting with Chinese officials in Alaska next week.
"We will certainly be raising them again in Alaska," Blinken said on Wednesday when asked if he and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will raise the issue concerning Uyghurs during a meeting with Chinese counterparts on March 18.
Next week, Blinken and Sullivan will travel to Alaska to meet with China's Central Commission Office for Foreign Affairs Director Yang Jiechi and State Councilor Wang Yi.
State Department spokesperson Ned Price said earlier that the US officials will discuss a range of issues, but did not provide details.
The meeting will take place after Blinken visits Japan and South Korea early next week.

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Canada's Central Bank Says Economy to Grow in 1st Quarter in Reversal of Past Estimates

TORONTO, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Bank of Canada noinw expects the national economy to grow in the first quarter of 2021, countering its earlier projections for a loss, the central bank said.
In January, Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem said that a resurgent coronavirus pandemic in Canada will cause the country's economy to contract by 2.5 percent in the first quarter of 2021.
"GDP growth in the first quarter of 2021 is now expected to be positive, rather than the contraction forecast in January," the Bank of Canada said in its overnight ratings decision on Wednesday.
The central bank motivated this, saying that the Canadian economy proved to be more resilient than expected during the second wave of the pandemic; economic activity in Canada grew by 9.6 percent in the final quarter of 2020.
However, the Bank said that there remains significant economic slack, with multiple segments of the population, including young adults and women still facing unemployment rates well above the national average.
Earlier on Wednesday, the Bank of Canada announced that it has decided to maintain the target overnight rate at 0.25 percent and continue its program of quantitative easing and purchasing weekly $3-billion worth of government bonds as the economy labors through the novel coronavirus pandemic.
The Bank's deputy governor, Lawrence Schembri, is expected to deliver an address to Restaurants Canada explaining the latest monetary policy decisions and to outline future priorities and objectives.
The next overnight rate announcement is due on April 21.

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US Designates IS Affiliates, Leaders in DRC, Mozambique - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State designated the affiliates of the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique as foreign terrorist organizations, the Office of the Spokesperson said in a statement.
"The Department of State has designated the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria - Democratic Republic of the Congo (ISIS-DRC) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria - Mozambique (ISIS-Mozambique) as Foreign Terrorist Organizations under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended," the statement said. "The Department has also designated ISIS-DRC and ISIS-Mozambique as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) under Executive Order 13224, while also designating respective leaders of those organizations, Seka Musa Baluku and Abu Yasir Hassan, as SDGTs."

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Pentagon Creates Climate Working Group - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has established a working group to oversee the Pentagon's climate and energy-saving activities, spokesperson John Kirby told reporters.
"The Climate Working Group will be the primary forum to do a couple of things. One, to coordinate Department responses to the Executive Order [14008] and subsequent climate and energy-related directives, and, two, track the implementation of actions and progress against future goals," Kirby said during a briefing on Wednesday.
Executive Order 14008, issued by US President Joe Biden on January 27, identified climate considerations as an essential element of the United States' foreign policy and national security. Austin appointed his Special Assistant Joe Bryan to chair the Climate Working Group.
In his memorandum Austin vowed to incorporate climate risk analysis into all of Pentagon's work "from installation planning to modeling, simulation, and war gaming, to the National Defense Strategy and all other relevant strategy, planning and programming documents and processes including those supporting decision making in the Military Departments."

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US Senate Minority Leader Says 'Extremely Uncomfortable' With Heightened Capitol Security

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - There is no need for the heightened security around the Capitol complex, US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell told reporters.
"I am extremely uncomfortable with the fact that my constituents cannot come to the Capitol with all this razor wire around the complex. It reminds me about my last visit to Kabul," McConnell said on Wednesday. "I think we continue to overreact based on current threat levels and what is needed here at the Capitol. It looks terrible to have the beacon of our democracy surrounded by razor wire and National Guard troops."
The Defense Department last week approved US Capitol Police request to extend the deployment of National Guard troops through May 23 due to the potential threats of US militia groups attacking lawmakers at the Capitol.
At the same time, 2,300 or a half of the previously deployed National Guards troops will continue their deployment in the capital.
The enhancement of the physical security infrastructure on the Capitol grounds followed January 6 incident when a group of Trump supporters enter to protest lawmakers accepting elector slates from states Trump claims were invalid and robbed him of election victory.

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UN Chief Says Syrian War Proves Global Security Governance Not Effective

UNITED NATIONS, March 10 (Sputnik) - The ten-year-long conflict in Syria exposed the ineffectiveness of the international security governance system to intervene in such crises, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement to mark the anniversary of the war.
"It is clear that if a war lasts 10 years, the international security governance system that we have is not effective," Guterres said on Wednesday. "It will be important that the UN Security Council, [and] all the other instruments of the international community should be more able to intervene when we have dramatic situations like these going on for so long."

Guterres referred to the situation in the country as a "living nightmare," where people have endured some of the "greatest crimes" the world has seen this century.
"Bombs and mortars have rained down on homes, schools, hospitals and markets. Chemical weapons have caused unspeakable suffering. Cities have been placed under siege, starving civilians," he said.
The UN chief said it was crucial to negotiate a political settlement to end the war. The first step toward this path should be to reach tangible progress in the Syrian Constitutional Committee.
"I hope that the relative paralysis, or at least the very slow process that we had in the past, can be overcome," Guterres added.

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US to Share Surplus Coronavirus Vaccines With Rest of World - Biden

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States will share coronavirus vaccines with other countries if it ends up with a surplus, US President Joe Biden told reporters.
"If we have a surplus, we are going to share with the rest of the world," Biden said.
Biden vowed to have enough vaccines for every adult American by the end of May and directed the purchase another 100 million doses.
"We are going to start off making sure Americans are taken care of first. But we then are going to try and help the rest of the world," Biden said.

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US Imposes New Myanmar Sanctions on 2 Children of Military Leader, 6 Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed new sanctions on the two adult children of Myanmar's military leader and six companies they control, the Treasury Department said.
"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned the two adult children of the commander-in-chief of the Burmese military forces, Min Aung Hlaing, who is the leading actor in the overthrow of Burma's democratically elected government, as well as six companies of his two adult children," the Treasury said in a statement on Wednesday.
The children, Aung Pyae Sone and Khin Thiri Thet Mon, have a variety of business holdings, which have directly benefited from their father's position and malign influence, the statement said.
The sanctions come in response to Myanmar's February 1 military coup and the subsequent killings of protesters who objected to the takeover, the statement said.

Min Aung Hlaing was previously sanctioned by the US as a leader of the coup, while the children were added to the sanctions with Wednesday's action, it added.
The statement also urged the immediate release of State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, as well as all others detained following the coup, including members of civil society, journalists, and human rights activists.

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Biden Says to Lay Out Next Phase of COVID-19 Response on Thursday

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) – President Joe Biden said he plans to lay out the next phase of the US COVID-19 response during his prime time address to the nation on March 11.
"I will launch the next phase of the COVID response. And will explain what we will do as a government and what we will ask of the American people," Biden said on Wednesday during an event with the CEOs of Johnson & Johnson and Merck companies.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik)

US RELATIONS WITH CHINA, JAPAN, SOUTH KOREA
* US Secretary of State Antony Blinlen and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will meet their Chinese counterparts in Alaska next week for talks on a range of issues, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.
* Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will make their first foreign trip to Japan and South Korea next week for talks with their counterparts, the State Department and the Pentagon said.

ROSATOM TO BUILD NUCLEAR POWER UNITS ABROAD
* Rosatom hopes to launch the reactor of the second power unit of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant this year, the company's Director General Alexey Likhachev said on Wednesday.
* Rosatom expects to obtain a license to build a nuclear power plant in Egypt next year, Likhachev said.
* The construction of the fourth power unit of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, which is being built in the Turkish province of Mersin by Russia's Rosatom, will begin in 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said.
* The successful implementation of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Turkey will bring Ankara-Moscow energy cooperation to a new level, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

MYANMAR DEVELOPMENTS
* At least 67 people have been killed in Myanmar since the country's military seized power on February 1 and hundreds more have been injured , United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC
* Jordan's regulatory authorities have authorized the use of Sputnik V, a Russian vaccine against COVID-19, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said on Wednesday.
* The coronavirus vaccination campaign in Russia will hopefully go faster, President Vladimir Putin said.
* Anna Popova, the head of Russia's Rostpotrebnadzor consumer rights protection watchdog, said there is no need for the mass vaccination of children.
* The US House of Representatives approved the Senate-passed version of the $1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill, sending it to President Joe Biden's desk for signature.

ARMENIA DEVELOPMENTS
* Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on Wednesday held a phone conversation with his Armenian counterpart Vagharshak Harutyunyan and discussed military cooperation between the two countries and the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Armenian President Armen Sarkissian invited Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, leaders of the parliamentary forces and the opposition Homeland Salvation Movement for a meeting on Saturday, the president's office said.
* Armenian President Armen Sarkissian has received the prime minister's request to appoint Artak Davtyan as the new general staff chief and has three days to provide an answer, presidential aide Asmik Petrosyan told Sputnik.

SAUDI-RUSSIA TALKS
* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Wednesday after talks with his Saudi counterpart, Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, that they confirmed commitment to strengthen cooperation in the global hydrocarbon markets.
* Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud said that the recent failed attacks on Ras Tanura port and the ARAMCO ports in the Saudi eastern city of Dhahran targeted global economy and global energy security.
* Moscow and Riyadh are in talks on potential phase 3 clinical trials of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in Saudi Arabia and its production there, Lavrov said.

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US to Look at Whether Nord Stream 2 AG Involved in Sanctionable Activity - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's administration will assess whether the project operator Nord Stream 2 AG is involved in any sanctionable activity, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in testimony to Congress on Wednesday.
When asked whether Washington believes Nord Stream 2 AG is engaging in sanctionable activity, Blinken said this was "Something we will look at very carefully."
Earlier at the hearing, Blinken said that the United States is looking at other possible sanctions targets over the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.
On Monday, a group of House Republicans sent Blinken a letter urging the administration to submit to Congress new sanctions designations related to Nord Stream 2 as soon as possible rather than wait until May 17 - when the current 90-day reporting period ends.
Nord Stream 2 is a joint venture of Russian energy company Gazprom and five European partners, aimed at the construction of a twin pipeline to deliver Russian gas to Germany beneath the Baltic Sea. The project is a target of criticism and sanctions by United States, which calls it a threat to energy security of Europe and Ukraine.

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US Reviewing Other Possible Sanctions Targets Over Nord Stream 2 Pipeline - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is looking at other possible sanctions targets over the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Wednesday.
"Unfortunately, the pipeline as you know is 95 percent complete but we are making clear that we stand against its completion," Blinken said. "We issued an initial report and sanctioned the leading pipe laying ship, and we continue to review other possibilities for sanctions going forward."
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US Authorities Apprehended 100,441 Migrants at Southern Border - CBP Data

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US immigration enforcement apprehended 100,441 migrants crossing into the United States illegally on the southern border in the month of February, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data revealed on Wednesday.
The CBP data shows 100,441 migrants were apprehended at the US southern border in February, a significant jump from 78,442 migrants that were apprehended in January.
A total of 396,958 migrants have been apprehended at the US southern border in fiscal year 2021, which began in October.
The data shows that since October, about 317,590 migrants have been "expelled," turned away immediately at the border under a public health-related policy known as Title 42. The highest number of migrants expelled in fiscal year 2021 occurred in February with 70,183 expulsions.
As of February 27, ICE has completed 29,944 deportations since October.
The White House has warned asylum-seeking migrants coming to the border that they will be turned away since the Biden administration does not have a "humane" policy to process their claims.
The current apprehension numbers are on pace to beat the previous mass migration that happened in fiscal year 2019, which saw a total of 977,509 apprehensions. Republican lawmakers and state officials in the Republican state of Texas have been expressing deep concern about the influx of migrants illegally crossing into the United States because it is starting to strain US immigration resources along the Texas-Mexico border.

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US Intends to Boost Economic, Security Support to Ukraine - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is set to enhance its economic and security assistance to Ukraine, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.
"We are strongly in support of Ukraine, we intend to strengthen that support whether it's security, economic, or its efforts to strengthen its own democracy," Blinken said at an event,
Earlier in March, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby announced that the United States will provide a new $125 million security assistance package to Ukraine that includes two patrol boats, equipment and training.
The United States encourages Ukraine to modernize its defenses in line with NATO principles and standards and stands committed to assist it with reforms, Kirby added.
Since 2014, the US has committed well over $1.6 billion in security assistance to Ukraine, including 360 Javeline anti-tank missiles.

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Rights Groups Urge US to Abandon Expansion of Airport Facial Recognition Surveillance

* WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - A coalition of more than 20 civil rights organizations urged the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to drop a proposed regulation that would expand facial recognition at airports and border crossings, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) announced on Wednesday.
"This proposed rule poses grave risks to the privacy of immigrants and all visitors to the United States, giving the government a dangerous tool that could allow it to track everyday movements and private associations," senior staff attorney with the ACLU National Security Project Ashley Gorski said in press release.
Under the proposed regulation, all noncitizen travelers, including children, may be required to be photographed upon entry and departure from the United States. US citizen travelers who do not affirmatively opt out may be photographed as well, the release said.
Tests of facial recognition technology have shown it works best with white people while frequently misidentifying minorities, especially African Americans, according to media reports. More than dozen US jurisdictions have banned police from using face recognition technology, the ACLU said.

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US Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Deficit Stands at $1.05 Trillion - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The US budget deficit stands at $1.05 trillion in the first five months of fiscal 2021 after growing by nearly $311 billion in February, the Treasury Department said in its monthly balance sheet reported on Wednesday.
Outlays for October to February amounted to $2.482 trillion while receipts totaled $1.436 trillion, resulting in the $1.05 trillion deficit, according to the balance sheet.
The highest deficit for fiscal 2021 was in February, when outlays were at $559.24 billion versus receipts at $248.31 billion, resulting in a net monthly deficit of $310.99 billion.
In fiscal 2020, the Treasury Department reported a budget deficit of $3.13 trillion. That budget shortfall came after the issuance of some $3 trillion in congressional relief for businesses and individuals amid the coronavirus pandemic.
The 2021 deficit so far includes an additional $900 billion in coronavirus relief funds passed under the Trump administration in November. It is expected to grow further from current President Joe Biden's $1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill that was approved by Congress earlier in the day.

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US Senate Confirms Garland to Be Next Attorney General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday confirmed President Joe Biden's nomination of Merrick Garland to be the next US Attorney General.
The Senate voted 70-30 to approve Garland's nomination.
Garland said in a confirmation hearing that Biden made clear that the attorney general would have full, independent discretion about whom to investigate and prosecute for alleged crimes and that the president had never raised the issue of whether his own son Hunter Biden should or should not be investigated.
Garland, who successfully prosecuted white supremacist Timothy McVeigh for blowing up a Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 168 people including 19 children, said that since then he had developed strong concerns about the use and abuse of the death penalty in the United States. McVeigh was executed by lethal injection in 2001.
In 2016, Garland was nominated by then-President Barack Obama for the Supreme Court but the Republican majority controlling the Senate refused to let his nomination be discussed until Obama left office.

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US Senate Confirms Garland to Be Next Attorney General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday voted to confirm President Joe Biden's nomination of Merrick Garland to be the next US attorney general.
A majority of senators approved Garland's nomination, with voting still underway.

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Russia to Convene Informal UN Security Council Meeting on Crimea March 17 - Deputy Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 10 (Sputnik) - Russia will convene next week an informal meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the situation in Crimea next week, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday.
The UN Security Council on Friday will hold another so-called Arria formula meeting on Crimea, co-hosted by Estonia and other Western countries.
Polyanskiy said for that meeting, Russia proposed to invite briefers who live in Crimea to participate in the meeting and inform the Security Council about the actual state of affairs on the peninsula; however, Western representatives declined the offer.
"Therefore, we, in agreement with the Crimeans, announced the conduct of our Arria formula meeting on Crimea on March 17. People who live on the peninsula selected excellent speakers representing the Crimean public," Polyanskiy said.
Polyanskiy said he expected the Western countries to take part in the event, adding that Russia will participate in their meeting on Friday.
In March 2014, Crimea rejoined Russia after 97 percent of residents voted in a referendum to do so. The majority of Western countries and Ukraine refuse to recognize the results of the referendum and have imposed sanctions against Russia.

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Washington Post Employees to Start Returning to Office on July 6 - Staff

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Washington Post staff will start returning to the offices beginning July 6, writer Sarah Ellison and deputy editor Mike Madden said on Wednesday.
"On the one-year anniversary of Washington Post employees being ordered home for the pandemic, Publisher Fred Ryan announced today that a phased-in return to the office will begin July 6, with 10% of the workforce," Ellison said in a tweet.
The rest of the workforce should return to the office by "sometime this fall," Madden said in another tweet citing publisher Fred Ryan.
Today marks exactly a year since The Washington Post asked its employees to work from home in response to the worsening virus situation.

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US Oil Output Up Almost 1Mln Barrels Per Day Last Week - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US oil production increased by almost 1 million barrels per day (bpd) last week, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in its weekly petroleum supply-demand report on Wednesday.
Crude oil production was estimated at 10.9 million bpd at the end of the week to March 5 versus the 10 million bpd estimated for the week ended February 26. The data indicates output was recovering faster than refining after last month's storm-related outages in Texas, the heartland of US energy, and neighboring states.
As a result of higher production, crude inventories rose by 13.79 million barrels last week, compared with the 816,000 build expected by industry analysts surveyed by US media.
In the prior week, the crude build was 21.5 million barrels, even higher than the 19.2 million-barrel increase seen during the week ended April 10, 2020, when demand for oil cratered amid the coronavirus outbreak.
The EIA said US refining activity also grew to 69 percent of capacity at the end of last week, versus the previous week's record low of 56 percent.
On Tuesday, the EIA issued a Short Term Energy Outlook in which it said the resumption of normal weather in Texas and the repairs to the state's infrastructure raised expectations US production for March would return to 11 million bpd.

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US House Approves $1.9Trln COVID-19 Relief Bill, Sending to Biden for Signature

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Wednesday approved the Senate-passed version of the $1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill, sending it to President Joe Biden's desk for signature.
The House of Representatives voted 220-211 to pass the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.
White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki earlier on Wednesday said President Joe Biden would sign the bill into law on Friday.
"With today's expected passage of the rescue plan, I can announce that the President will sign the bill at the White House on Friday afternoon," Psaki said as voting on the bill was still underway.
The bill provides a one-time $1,400 check for eligible Americans, specifically to individuals that make less than $75,000 a year and married couples that make less than $150,000 a year.
In addition, Americans that make less than $150,000 will be eligible to receive $300 each week in unemployment benefits.
The bill assists the reopening of US schools, providing $125 billion to reopen all schools and $40 billion to help reopen universities.
The legislation supports public health measures by providing $20 billion for the development and distribution of vaccines and $48.3 billion to support mitigation efforts to help prevent the spread of the disease

The bill also includes $29 billion to help struggling restaurants and $350 billion to help keep frontline workers such as health care workers, law enforcement, and teachers employed.
The United States lost more than 21 million jobs last spring during the height of the lockdowns and other restrictive measures implemented amid the coronavirus pandemic. At least 10 million of those jobs have not returned, with the US economy shrinking 3.5 percent in 2020 after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.
The legislation has faced strong opposition from Republicans who have said only a small portion of the $1.9 trillion bill actually deals with combating the novel coronavirus while other funding in the bill is for foreign assistance and lawmakers' initiatives they deem unnecessary and wasteful.

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A majority of the House of Representatives voted to pass the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, with voting still underway.

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Biden to Sign $1.9 Trillion Relief Bill on Friday - White House

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will sign a nearly $2 trillion relief bill on Friday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Wednesday.
"With today's expected passage of the rescue plan, I can announce that the President will sign the bill at the White House on Friday afternoon," Psaki said, as voting on the bill was underway in the US House of Representatives.
The bill is expected to be approved by the House and will be delivered to the White House sometime tomorrow after its passage by the House, Psaki said.
Biden's so-called "American Rescue Plan," which cleared the Senate last week, is awaiting final approval expected by Wednesday from the House of Representatives. The US president is expected to sign it into law thereafter.
The bill aims to provide US states with coronavirus vaccinations and other pandemic-related assistance, including unemployment weekly benefits of $300 and a one-time check of $1,400 for most Americans.
In 2020, former president Donald Trump issued two COVID-19 relief bills totaling spending of nearly $4 trillion.

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UN Security Council Strongly Condemns Violence by Myanmar Military - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, March 10 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council issued a statement on Wednesday strongly condemning Myanmar's military for using violence against peaceful protesters.
"The Security Council strongly condemns the violence against peaceful protesters, including against women, youth and children," the statement said.
The Security Council urged the Myanmar military to exercise utmost restraint and emphasized that it is closely watching the situation in the country.
The statement was put under the so-called silence procedure and passed this afternoon, signalizing unity among Security Council members on the issue.
The Security Council also encouraged the UN Special Envoy for Myanmar to maintain communication with the parties and visit the country as soon as possible.
Mass protests have been ongoing across Myanmar nation since military conducted a coup and seized power on February 1. The United Nations said earlier the military's actions against the protesters have left at least 67 people dead.

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US Aim of Creating Modern Afghan State May Be 'Bridge Too Far' - Inspector General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The nearly 20 year US goal of creating a modern, centralized state in Afghanistan may prove to be "a bridge too far," Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John Sopko said in comments at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on Wednesday.
"Creating an Afghan state is a mission yet to be accomplished and may be impossible to do: It may prove to be 'a bridge too far,'" Sopko said in his additional, unscripted comments. "The goal of creating a self sustaining Afghan armed forces by 2024 is impossible and cannot be achieved."
The basic risk facing the current and any potential post-peace Afghan government is whether future foreign assistance levels during that uncertain period would be sufficient to prevent its collapse, Sopko cautioned.
"Today our report suggests the donor community should realize the Afghan government is focused on a single goal: survival. Afghanistan is more dependent on international support than ever before," Sopko said.

Almost 80 percent of Afghanistan's $11 billion in public expenditures in 2018 - the most recent year figures were available for - was covered by international donors and that situation had not improved since then, Sopko added.

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Bipartisan US Senate Bill Would Boost Oil, Gas Leasing Fees for Public Lands - Lawmakers

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Leasing rates for oil and natural gas companies to drill on federally owned land would rise by at least 50 percent under legislation introduced Wednesday by Democratic Senator Jacky Rosen and her Republican colleague Chuck Grassley.
"Big Oil continues to take advantage of low royalty rates on federal lands. Congress has not addressed this issue for over 100 years and since then, these oil companies have deprived the treasury and the American people of billions of dollars," Grassley said in a joint press release with Rosen.
The Fair Returns for Public Lands Act would set a uniform federal royalty at 18.75 percent, applied to new oil and gas leases, a 50 percent increase from the current 12.5 percent, the release said.
The lawmakers cited a Congressional Budget Office estimate that the higher royalty rate would raise an additional $200 million for the federal government over the next decade, with an equivalent amount returned to states where the oil and gas is being extracted.
The legislation would also increases rates for reinstated leases, to discourage oil and gas developers from sitting on leases for land they do not plan to explore or develop, the release said.
Congress passed the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920, setting up a system in which companies could lease public lands to wrest valuable oil and gas from the ground. In the century since, the royalties and rent that those corporations pay have remained essentially unchanged even as the scale of development and profits has grown, according to the release.

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US Revives Program to Reunite Central American Children With Parents - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is reviving a program to reunite Central American children with their parents who are legally residing in the United States, the State Department said on Wednesday.
"We are expanding legal pathways to enter the United States by reopening the Central American Minors (CAM) program. As directed by President Biden, the Departments of State and Homeland Security (DHS) have initiated the first phase of reinstituting and improving the CAM program to reunite qualified children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with their parent or parents who are lawfully present in the United States," the State Department said in a press release.
The CAM program has been reinstated to provide a safe alternative for migrant children considering the risky journey to the US southern border, the release said.
US immigration officials have already started reviewing eligible cases that were left in limbo when the program was terminated in 2017, the release said, adding that the first reunions are expected by the week of March 15.
The State Department warned that that US southern border remains closed to irregular migration and advised potential migrants not to make the trip to the United States.
About 559 migrant children traveling alone to the US-Mexico border were apprehended between October and January, according to data from US Customs and Border Protection.
As of February 18, there were about 6,800 migrant children with no parents under the care of the US Office of Refugee Resettlement.

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Taliban Could Seize Kabul Fast If Afghan Government Loses Foreign Aid - Inspector General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani could rapidly collapse and Taliban forces could quickly drive to the capital Kabul if all foreign assistance was ended, Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John Sopco said on Wednesday.
"If foreign assistance is withdrawn, Taliban forces could be at the gates of Kabul in short order," Sopco said in remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).
Foreign contractors provide 100 percent of the maintenance for the Afghan Air Force helicopters and C-130 transport aircraft and no Afghan air frame can be sustained as combat effective for more than a few months in the absence of contract support, Sopco also said.

"[C]ontractors currently provide 100 percent of the maintenance for Afghan Air Force UH-60 helicopters and C-130 cargo aircraft, and a significant portion for Afghan light combat support aircraft. And, TAAC [Train Advise Assist Command] Air's bleak assessment is that no Afghan airframe can be sustained as combat effective for more than a few months in the absence of contractor support," Sopko added.
In the first quarter of fiscal year 2021, there were over 18,000 Defense Department contractors in Afghanistan, but under the terms of the existing US-Taliban agreement, many, if not all of them including those responsible for logistics, maintenance or training tasks, would be required to leave the country, according to Sopco.
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US Challenges 28 'Excessive Maritime' Territory Claims by 19 Nations in 2020 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The US challenged what Washington considers unlawful maritime claims by 19 nations on 28 occasions in 2020, the Defense Department (DoD) said in its annual Freedom of Navigation (FON) Report on Wednesday.
"During the period from October 1, 2019, through September 30, 2020, U.S. forces operationally challenged 28 different excessive maritime claims made by 19 different claimants throughout the world," DoD said in a press release explaining the report.
The US defines "excessive maritime claims" as those that are inconsistent with international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention, the release said.
The report lists restrictions imposed by the 19 nations, which the US deliberately challenges with warships and military aircraft during FON operations to illustrate a demand that international waters remain open to free navigation.
While the unclassified report provided no details of the FON operations, it lists restrictions that claimants attempt to impose on outsiders.
For example, China requires outsiders to obtain permission from Beijing to fly or sail through the South China Sea and East China Sea, which the US considers international waterways, according to the report.
China has also attempted to outlaw all surveying, mapping and exploration of both bodies of water, the report said.

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Afghan Forces Can Not Meet 2024 Goal to Operate Without US Support - Inspector General

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Afghanistan's military and security forces will not be able to function independently by 2024 without US financial and other support, Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John Sopco said in remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on Wednesday.

"[T]he Defense Department no longer considers the long-held goal of a financially self-sustaining Afghan security force by 2024 to be realistic," Sopco said.
The Afghan government cannot even effectively manage the money it currently receives from international donors, especially to finance its security forces, and the US government believes it will not even be able to operate a state-of-the-art payroll system that the United States supplied for several years to come, Sopco also said.
"The US military believes the Afghan government may be several years away from being able to take over ownership, management, and sustainment of the $50 million payroll system used to ensure that the US taxpayer is not paying for Afghan 'ghost' soldiers who exist only on paper and that military and police salaries do not end up in the pockets of corrupt officials," Sopko added.
If the goal of the US-led reconstruction effort was to build a strong, stable, self-reliant Afghan state that could protect US national security interests as well as its own, it was a mission that had yet to be accomplished, according to Sopko.

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RPT - Texas Invites New Coronavirus Surge By Lifting Mask Mandate - Fauci

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Texas is inviting a new surge in coronavirus cases after the state's authorities ended the mask mandate, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci said in an interview on Wednesday.
"It's [a] concern," Fauci told CNN. "When you start doing things like completely putting aside all public health measures as if you are turning a light switch off, that's quite risky. We don't want to see another surge, and that's inviting one when you do that."
Fauci also said the situation with respect to containing the spread of the coronavirus has improved after the Biden administration and its COVID-19 Task Force put scientists at the forefront of the response to the pandemic.
Last week, Texas Governor Greg Abbott announced businesses in the state could fully reopen and rescinded the mask mandate and other restrictive measures.

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Homeland Security (DHS) have initiated the first phase of reinstituting and improving the CAM program to reunite qualified children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with their parent or parents who are lawfully present in the United States."

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Blinken, Sullivan to Meet Chinese Counterparts in Alaska Next Week - State Dept.
WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinlen and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will meet their Chinese counterparts in Alaska next week for talks on a range of issues, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.
"Blinken and ... Sullivan will meet on March 18 in Anchorage, Alaska with People's Republic of China (PRC) Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi and State Councilor Wang Yi," Price said.
The officials will discuss a range of issues, he added, without providing additional details.
The meeting will take place after Blinken visits Japan and South Korea earlier in the week, Price said.

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UN Rights Office Says at Least 67 People Killed in Myanmar Since Military Seized Power

UNITED NATIONS, March 10 (Sputnik) - At least 67 people have been killed in Myanmar since the country's military seized power on February 1 and hundreds more have been injured , United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.
"The UN Human Rights Office tells us that as of March 8, at least 67 people, including women and children, have been confirmed to have been killed, hundreds more people have been injured," Dujarric said.

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Biden to Order 100Mln J&J Vaccine Doses as Pfizer, Moderna Double Output - White House

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden plans to procure from Johnson & Johnson an additional 100 million doses of the firm's single-dose coronavirus vaccine, White House COVID-19 adviser Andy Slavitt said on Wednesday.
"Today Biden will direct... the health and human services team to procure an additional 100 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine," Slavitt said at a press briefing. "This order

allows for the president to plan for the future and the latter part of the year. This is wartime and as facts still emerge it gives us maximum flexibility for our upcoming needs."
Slavitt also said Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, makers of a vaccine requiring two shots, have doubled weekly shipments from 10 million doses to 20 million doses at present.
As of Wednesday, 61 million Americans had received the first shot of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine and another 32 million have been fully vaccinated with two jabs, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

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Karabakh Conflict Remains Serious Challenge, Requires Lasting Solution - OSCE Chair

UNITED NATIONS, March 10 (Sputnik) - The unsettled conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh represents a serious challenge to international peace and requires the international community to renew its efforts to achieve a lasting peace agreement, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Chairperson-in-Office Anne Linde said on Wednesday.
"The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a serious challenge to international peace and security," Linde told the UN Security Council. "The ceasefire achieved in November, with the assistance of Russia, brought about a working stop to hostilities. Now, we must seize this moment to renew efforts towards a lasting peace agreement."
Linde said she will encourage the two sides to recommit to talks on a sustainable political solution when she visits Baku and Yerevan next week.

The decades-long Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan flared up in late September, resulting in significant military and civilian casualties on both sides. The hostilities ended after the two sides agreed to a Russian-brokered ceasefire in November. The deal resulted in the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the region and in the transfer of areas surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan.

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Two-Drug Cocktail Cuts COVID-17 Hospitalizations, Deaths by 87% - Eli Lilly

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - A just completed Phase 3 trial of a two-drug therapy for COVID-19 victims showed an 87 percent reduction in hospitalizations and deaths, the manufacturer Eli Lilly said Wednesday.
"Across the two Phase 3 cohorts of the study that have been analyzed to date, there have been no deaths in patients receiving treatment with bamlanivimab and etesevimab together, and 14 deaths in patients receiving placebo, 13 of which were deemed COVID-19 related," Eli Lilly said in a press release.
The most recent of two Phase 3 trials included 769 high-risk patients, 511 of whom received the drugs and 258 who received a placebo, the release said.
"[The] therapy reduced risk of hospitalizations and death by 87 percent," the release said.
The trials also indicated the therapy is effective for newly emerging variants of the coronavirus, the release added.
Bamlanivimab and etesevimab together and bamlanivimab alone previously received emergency use authorization by the Food and Drug Administration for treatment of mild to moderate COVID-19 in adults and children at least 12-years-old, according to the release.

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US, Israel to Hold Joint Strategic Talks on March 11 - White House

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) – Top security officials from the United States and Israel will hold a joint strategic dialogue later this week, White House National Security Council Spokesperson Emily Horne said on Wednesday.
"On March 11, the United States and Israel will hold the first virtual US-Israel Strategic Consultative Group meeting, led by US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Israeli National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat," Horne said in a statement.
Both parties will discuss regional issues, she added.
"This meeting is part of the broader ongoing dialogue between the United States and Israel on the full range of issues of importance to the bilateral relationship, building on longstanding dialogues between our two nations under previous administrations," Horne said.

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US Ready to Work With Russia, China on Climate Change - Kerry

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to cooperate with Russia, China and other countries on issues concerning climate change, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry said on Wednesday.
"We will work, I hope, with China, with India, with Russia, with people with whom we have differences on other issues obviously," Kerry said during his stay in Brussels, Belgium.
Kerry is visiting Brussels, London and Paris to work with US allies to strengthen what he called a "global climate ambition" ahead of two key summits on the issue.
The Special Envoy pointed out that addressing climate change does not require trading that issue for other issues. Climate change requires everybody to do what is necessary to meet this challenge, Kerry added.
Under the Biden administration, the United States has resumed its active participation in projects focused on climate change. One of President Joe Biden's executive orders at the beginning of assuming office concerned the return of the Unite States to the Paris Climate Agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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At Least 39 Migrants Drown in Shipwreck Off Tunisia Coast - UNHCR

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - At least 39 people have drowned in a shipwreck off the coast of Tunisia near the Kerkennath island, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said in a joint release on Wednesday.
"At least 39 people drowned in a shipwreck off Kerkennah island. One hundred thirty-four survivors, most of them from [Ivory Coast], were brought to shore by Tunisia's coast guard. The rescue operations are still ongoing, hampered yesterday by harsh weather conditions," the release said.
The rescue operation is the latest in a series of 21 such operations carried out by Tunisian government in 2021, the release noted.
According to the UNHCR, 190 people have died while traveling across the Central Mediterranean in 2021, while 5,700 others managed to reach Italy from North Africa.
The central Mediterranean has become the scene of numerous shipwrecks with multiple deaths of migrants who are taking a risk to cross to Europe.

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Japan Donates $110Mln to 37 Countries Through UN World Food Program

UNITED NATIONS, March 10 (Sputnik) - Japan has donated $110 million to provide food aid to people at risk in 37 countries across three continents, the World Food Program (WFP) announced in a news release on Wednesday.
"The United Nations World Food Program has welcomed a total contribution of US$110 million from the Government of Japan towards its food assistance and livelihood support to vulnerable people in 37 countries across Asia, the Middle East and Africa," the release said.
The WSP said some $20.6 million of the new aid will be used to provide life-saving support to families in Yemen, where nearly 50,000 people are living in famine-like conditions, with 5 million more at risk due to the ongoing civil war there.
"In Afghanistan, a $12.9 million allocation will support WFP's response for families affected by the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. A further grant of $10.6 million will enable WFP to continue its support to people facing food insecurity in Syria, as well as vulnerable people ... in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon," the release said.
In Africa, the Japanese funds will support WFP's emergency food assistance to Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mali, and livelihood and COVID-19 response programs in Somalia and Ethiopia, the release added.
Other countries to benefit from the aid are: Angola, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Eswatini, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Palestine, Republic of Congo, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sudan, Tunisia, Uganda and Zimbabwe, according to the release.

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WFP Chief Calls for Urgent Funding to Mitigate Looming Famine in Yemen - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, March 10 (Sputnik) - World Food Program (WFP) Executive Director David Beasley on Wednesday called for urgent funding to help the vulnerable people in Yemen with food and avoid a famine.
"Over half of the people in Yemen are facing acute food shortages with millions knocking on the door of famine," Beasley said in a statement. "Famine-like conditions are emerging across Yemen and the answer is simple. We have a vaccine for this. It is called food. All we need to save lives is funding."
Beasley said some 2.3 million or half of all children under the age of five are projected to face acute malnutrition this year, and nearly 400,000 are suffering from acute malnutrition likely to die unless they receive urgent treatment.

More than 16 million people across the country are food insecure, while nearly 50,000 people are living in famine-like conditions, another five million individuals are only one step away, Beasley added.
"This is hell. Absolutely horrendous. Yemen is becoming the worst place on earth, and it is totally man-made," Beasley said.
The WFP needs $1.9 billion to provide food and avert a famine in 2021, according to Beasley. The latest donor pledging conference on Yemen, co-hosted by the United Nations, concluded on March 1 without even collecting enough resources to provide the minimum amount of food. International donors pledged $1.7 billion - less than the organization received for the humanitarian action in Yemen in 2020.

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Denmark Joins 4 NATO Allies in Europe With Inaugural Flight of F-35 - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Denmark became the fifth NATO nation in Europe armed the with the F-35 fighter jet during an inaugural flight earlier this week, the manufacturer Lockheed-Martin said on Wednesday.
"Denmark is joining four other European nations who already operate the F-35: the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Norway and Italy," Lockheed Martin said in a press release.
The F-35 will serve as a force multiplier for Denmark, allowing the Royal Danish Air Force to train and fight alongside NATO allies and create a strong deterrent, the release said.

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Vaccinated Americans Show Caution in Abandoning COVID-19 Mitigation Measures - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Vaccinated Americans continue to wear facemasks in public and avoid large crowds - basic COVID-19 protection measures recommended by US health officials, according to a new Gallup poll based on interviews conducted over the past two months.
"Vaccine recipients are just as likely as non-recipients to say they are wearing facemasks in public, consistent with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]," a press release explaining the poll said.
In addition, vaccinated Americans are just as likely as their unvaccinated peers to avoid large crowds, the release said.
Ninety-eight percent of fully vaccinated Americans say they continue to wear masks outside the home, 97 percent of partially vaccinated people say the same as do 98 percent of people who plan to be vaccinated but have yet to receive the first of two shots, the release also said.

Nearly identical percentages of the three groups also said they continue to avoid large crowds (82-to-84 percent) and also avoid travel (77-to-78 percent), the release added.
To some degree, the reluctance of vaccine recipients to alter behavior could reflect uncertainty about new coronavirus variants and how well the vaccines the variants, according to the release.

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Bank of Canada Maintains Overnight Rate at 0.25% - Statement

TORONTO, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Bank of Canada said in a statement on Wednesday that it has decided to maintain the target overnight rate at 0.25 percent as the economy labors through the novel coronavirus pandemic.
"The Bank of Canada today held its target for the overnight rate at the effective lower bound of 0.25 percent, with the Bank Rate at 0.5 percent and the deposit rate at 0.25 percent," the statement said.
Canada's central bank added it will continue its program of quantitative easing and purchasing weekly $3-billion worth of government bonds.
The Bank of Canada's next overnight rate announcement is due on April 21.

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UNICEF Appeals for $1.4Bln for Response in Syria, Neighboring Countries - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said in a statement on Wednesday that it is urging the international community to help fund its $1.4 billion program to help children in Syria and in neighboring countries.
"As Syria marks 10 years of war, UNICEF reminds the warring parties, those with influence over them and the wider international community that: Humanitarian organizations like UNICEF urgently need the support and funding they need to deliver assistance to Syria's children," the statement said. "UNICEF is appealing for US$1.4 billion for its response inside Syria and the neighboring countries for 2021."
UNICEF noted that children associated with armed groups, particularly those in the northeast of Syria, must be reintegrated in local communities, while kids of foreign nationals must be repatriated safely to their countries of origin.
UNICEF also called on the sides to the conflict in Syria to refrain from attacks on children and civilian infrastructure.
"We call for the renewal of the UN Security Council Resolution on cross border assistance allowing the continuation of delivery of lifesaving assistance across Syria's borders," the statement said. "There are no winners in this war and the biggest loss is brought upon Syria's

children. It is time for warring parties to put the guns down and come to the negotiation table. Peace and diplomacy are the only way out of this abyss."
UNICEF said the ten-year war in Syria "has left the lives and futures of a generation of children hanging by a thread" and 90 percent of children are currently in need of humanitarian assistance, .
Last year, the price of the average food basket in the country grew by over 230 percent, while the reported numbers of children showing symptoms of psychosocial distress doubled in 2020, UNICEF also said.
"According to verified data, between 2011 and 2020: Almost 12,000 children were killed or injured; More than 5,700 children - some as young as seven years old - were recruited into the fighting," the statement said. "More than 1,300 education and medical facilities and personnel have come under attack."
UNICEF explained that the situation in northern Syria is particularly alarming.
"In the northwest, millions of children remain displaced, with many families having fled violence multiple times, some as many as seven times, in search of safety," the statement said. "More than 75 per cent of the grave violations recorded in 2020 occurred in the northwest."
In addition, in the Al-Hol camp and throughout northeast Syria, 27,500 children of at least 60 nationalities as well as thousands of Syrian children associated with armed groups are staying in camps and detention centers.
"Violence has recently surged in Al-Hol, putting lives at risk and highlighting the need for long-term solutions including reintegration in local communities or the safe repatriation of children to their countries of origin," the statement added.

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US Consumer Prices Rise 0.4% in February as Energy Prices Soar - Labor Dept

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices grew by 0.4 percent in February, with rising gasoline costs accounting for more than half the increase, the Labor Department said on Wednesday.
“The Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers increased 0.4 percent in February on a seasonally adjusted basis after rising 0.3 percent in January,” the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, an unit within the Labor Department, said in a statement. CPI growth for over the last 12 months was 1.7 percent before seasonal adjustment, it said.
Gasoline prices drove more than half the overall increase, rising by 6.4 percent in February as US pump prices neared $3 per gallon, their highest in 18 months. Electricity and natural gas indexes also increased, driving the energy index up by 3.9 percent, the statement said. Food prices also rose, though by a far less degree, at 0.2 percent for February.
Both the monthly and 12-month readings were in line with the expectations of economists surveyed by US media.
“The real question is how hot prices run when the economy reopens and whether that's a one-off or sustained,” Adam Button, analyst at ForexLive, said in a commentary.

Economists have expressed concerns in recent weeks that a US economy liberated by the COVID-19 vaccinations could result in overheating, sending prices of everything from fuel to food spiking.
Moody's Analytics lead economist Mark Zandi warned in a recent interview with CNBC that Wall Street was significantly underestimating the inflation surge expected from President Joe Biden's recovery plan, which he said would affect every corner of industry — from big tech to cyclical trades.
Biden's $1.9 trillion "American Rescue Plan" for COVID-19 was approved by the Senate last week and is expected to clear the House of Representatives on Wednesday, paving the way for him to sign it into law.
The bill aims to provide US states with COVID-19 vaccinations and other pandemic-related help; make financial grants for small businesses; aid school reopenings; pay unemployment benefits of $300 weekly and send out one-time checks of $1,400 to most Americans.
There are concerns, however, that employment and wage growth might not keep up with inflation likely to spout from the spending down the road.
Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Thursday he did not expect the United States to return anytime this year or so soon to maximum employment, which will be one the central bank's criteria for raising interest rates. Under the Fed's definition, maximum employment is achieved when the jobless rate is at 4.0 percent or lower. February's US jobs report showed unemployment at 6.2 percent.
The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the virus. At least 10 million of those jobs have not returned, with the US economy shrinking 3.5 percent in 2020 after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.

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Blinken, Austin to Make First Foreign Trip to Tokyo, Seoul Next Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will make their first foreign trip to Japan and South Korea next week for talks with their counterparts, the State Department and the Pentagon said on Wednesday.
"On March 16-17 in Tokyo, Secretary Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III will attend the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee ("2+2") meeting hosted by Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs Toshimitsu Motegi and Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.
The two Biden administration officials on March 17-18 will also attend a US-ROK Foreign and Defense Ministerial, or "2+2" in Seoul hosted by South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Defense Minister Suh Wook, Price said.
During the visit to Tokyo, Blinken will hold separate meetings with Motegi and other senior Japanese officials to discuss a range of bilateral and global issues, Price said
During a virtual discussion with business leaders, the top US diplomat will highlight the importance of bilateral economic ties and talk about the economic impact of COVID-19.

Separately, Austin will visit India, the Pentagon said in a news release. During his meetings with his counterpart Rajnath Singh and other senior national security leaders, he will discuss deepening the US-India Major Defense Partnership and advancing bilateral cooperation, the release said.
Before embarking on his foreign trip, Austin will also pay a visit to US Indo-Pacific Command Headquarters in Hawaii to meet with troops and senior commanders to underscore his vision for the region as a priority theater for the Department of Defense, the release said.

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RPT: FEATURE - Georgia Republicans' Voting Restrictions Under Fire by Activists

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - Nicole Henderson and her colleagues at the New Georgia Project did not have very long to celebrate the fruits of their labor: an impressive ground game that helped turn Georgia "blue" in November 2020, and two stunning electoral victories in US senate runoffs that gave control of the chamber to Democrats. Less than two weeks after Democratic candidates Rafael Warnock and Jon Ossoff won their Senate seats on January 5, Republicans in the Georgia legislature set in motion voter suppression efforts, Henderson said.
"As you can imagine, we're extremely frustrated, upset by their attempt to roll back the ability of Georgians to vote," Henderson, the organization's Director of Communications, told Sputnik. "What we see in this legislature in Georgia and the rest of the country is a direct result of the other side losing. This will hurt voters on both sides, including Black voters. We do not need people standing in line, not being able to vote safely... we need drop boxes and mail-in ballots being available in the midst of the pandemic."
US activists and rights groups have warned that the Georgia Republicans are hoping to use voting restrictions to reverse the Democratic gains.
REPUBLICAN OFFENSIVE: SOLUTION IN SEARCH OF A PROBLEM
On Monday, the state of Georgia's Republican-majority senate passed legislation to restrict absentee ballots as protesters rallied outside the Capitol building in Atlanta. The bill, SB 241, would end the right to vote by mail without having to provide an excuse.
Republican lawmakers across the country, so far this year, have already pushed more than 250 bills to restrict voting in 43 states, according to the Brennan Center for Justice.
The onslaught is rooted in a 2013 US Supreme Court decision that gutted a landmark voting rights act. The ruling allowed states to change election laws without getting clearance from the US Department of Justice. Within days of the verdict, states and cities enacted a tidal wave of laws that rights groups said discriminated against minorities.
On March 1, Georgia Republicans passed House Bill 531, which would impose limits on voter drop-off boxes along with early voting while adding an ID requirement for absentee ballots. In addition, if anyone hands out food, water or drinks to those standing in line waiting to vote, they could be charged with a misdemeanor.

Former Congressional Assistant Campaign Organizer for Congressman Sanford Bishop, Erica Savage-Wilson, described Republican efforts as a solution in search of a problem and the proposals they are pushing as being "fiscally irresponsible."

"I expected this reaction. Georgia went for Biden by 11,000 votes and Warnock and Ossoff won. These laws are ensuring that people don't maximize their vote," Savage-Wilson, who is also director of outreach for Public Democracy, a political consulting firm, told Sputnik. "Election integrity is a push for Jim Crow-era restrictions, white only voting of poll taxes, literacy and other taxes to participate."

Savage-Wilson said by her count, approximately 47 bills have come out of the Georgia Special Committee on Electoral Integrity, formed on January 7 after Warnock and Ossoff won their elections. She said she considers the fight for voting rights to be a life-and-death issue. She also said it's very likely that these bills will pass.

The Black community, she added, is being disproportionately impacted by the efforts.

"This isn't a Democratic or Republican state but a voter suppression state," Savage-Wilson said. "We see these tactics popping up in Iowa and elsewhere. The demographics in Georgia have changed but because of voter suppression tactics, it has not been turned over the way it really is."

Eliza Sweren-Becker, who serves as counsel in the Democratic Program at the Brennan Center, said the strategy these legislatures are employing is deeply concerning.

"What we saw in November 2020 and in Georgia is that Americans are resilient. They do not like when politicians take away their ability to vote," she told Sputnik at the beginning of legislative sessions nationwide. "We're starting to see a legislative backlash developing. It's a one-two punch to blunt Americans' ability to vote."

The legislative push is just the latest iteration of voter suppression in the state of Georgia, the activists said.

When Georgia Governor Brian Kemp was secretary of state he purged more than 1.4 million primarily Black voters from the rolls between 2012 and 2018. Georgia's 2018 gubernatorial election - which pitted Kemp against House Minority leader Stacey Abrams - was marred by voter suppression tactics. Some voters' ballots were tossed because they were told by poll workers that they had the wrong ID while some were flagged incorrectly as non-citizens.

But 2020 proved to be different from elections before 2018 because of the organization, mobilization and animation of a considerable swathe of new or ignored voters across Georgia energized and registered by Abrams, Fair Fight, the New Georgia Project, ProGeorgia State Table, Georgia STANDUP and other groups.

Their work led to a total turnout of 134 percent, total in-person turnout of 47 percent and a 615 percent increase in absentee ballots.

OPPOSITION MOBILIZES AGAINST GEORGIA BILLS

In order to counter the Republican efforts, the advocates said there are a number of tools that opponents are prepared to use, including putting intense pressure on lawmakers and on corporations to get off the fence and then offer support and pressure on those in Congress to pass H.R. 1 and H.R. 4.

H.R. 1 was the first bill passed by the then-newly Democratically controlled House of Representatives in 2018. Called the "For the People Act," it is a sweeping legislative measure that seeks "to expand Americans' access to the ballot box, reduce the influence of big money in

politics, and strengthen ethics rules for public servants and for other purposes." H.R. 4 "establishes new criteria for determining which states and political subdivisions must obtain preclearance before changes to voting practices in these areas may take effect."

Almost two dozen major corporations are headquartered in Georgia. They include Home Depot, UPS, Delta Airlines, AT&T, The Southern Company and the Coca Cola Company. Other major US companies who have also funded co-sponsors of the Georgia bills to the tune of $7.4 million include Comcast, CVS, Walmart, General Motors and Publix.

Henderson and Savage-Wilson echoed other activists who have castigated these corporations for talking the talk but not walking the walk.

According to Popular Information, after culling through thousands of Georgia campaign finance records filed over the last three years, the Republican lawmakers and officials sponsoring these bills are backed by millions in corporate donations.

Yet the sponsors of these bills are supported by corporations that publicly embrace voting rights. For example, Coca-Cola, through its Sprite brand, ran a series of ads prior to the 2020 election stressing the importance of voting in the Black community. "Sprite is committed to supporting young Black creators & artists and the reasons why they vote," one ad said.

"ATT, for example, has given $99,000 since 2018 to people who have sponsored voter suppression legislation," said Henderson. "They need to speak out that they don't support these lawmakers. Coke and Delta have made statements about racial equality but at this point have remained on the fence."

Savage-Wilson said H.R. 1 and H.R. 4 must get passed because voter suppression is a life-and death issue for African Americans. She said she hopes voter suppression will not be going on in 2022.

"We owe people who were hospitalized, people who were not vested. We owe it to our children and generations to come," she said. "This is a direct attack on Black people. There's a lot that's at stake this year."

Georgia's Republican Senate Majority Leader Mike Dugan, the chief sponsor of SB 241, told The Washington Post this week that the surge in mail-in ballots increased costs and the burden on local election offices.