

**03/11/21 Thursday**

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US Grocery Store Administered Empty Syringes Instead of COVID-19 Vaccines  
by [Mary F.](#)

As of March 11, 10.2% of the US adult population has been fully vaccinated for the COVID-19 virus, while 19.3% has received at least one vaccination, according to the latest data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Multiple people who went to a local Kroger grocery store in Virginia to receive a COVID-19 vaccine this week were mistakenly given empty syringes instead, a Kroger spokesperson told [The Hill](#) on Thursday.

The incident occurred at a Kroger location in the suburban town of Midlothian, outside the state capital of Richmond.

"All impacted customers were contacted and have now received the COVID-19 vaccine," the spokesperson noted. "We apologize for this oversight and the inconvenience caused for these customers."

In a statement to [ABC affiliate WRIC](#), Kroger said that "less than 10" people were impacted by the incident, and that previous statements from the company stating that the syringes were filled with saline instead of the COVID-19 vaccine were incorrect.

Carrie Hawes, one of the people who received an empty shot at the Kroger location, told [NBC's Richmond affiliate station WWBT](#) that she received an appointment to get a Johnson & Johnson vaccine on Monday evening. The following day, she received a call about the mistake.

"My initial reaction was shock and surprise, and a little anxiety," she told the outlet, noting that she returned to the store after receiving the phone call to correctly receive the vaccination.

A Kroger spokesperson also confirmed to The Hill that the company has informed the Virginia Department of Health about the issue, and that clinic employees have been retrained on how to administer the inoculations.

The Kroger spokesperson also confirmed that the company has provided almost 1 million COVID-19 vaccines across the country.

"Kroger encourages everyone to receive whichever vaccine is available to them at the earliest point they become eligible," the spokesperson noted.

US President Joe Biden on Thursday signed into law a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package.

The sweeping package guarantees another round of stimulus checks to many American families, and provides funding for both COVID-19 vaccination programs and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides nutrition assistance to eligible low-income individuals and families.

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Pentagon Slams Tucker Carlson for Mocking Pregnant Service Members  
by [Mary F.](#)

Tucker Carlson is a US conservative television host and political commentator who hosts the nightly political talk show Tucker Carlson Tonight on Fox News. Carlson, who was also a print journalist in the 1990s, has been hosting the Fox News segment since 2016.

Military leaders and veterans groups slammed Carlson after the commentator suggested on his Tuesday-night segment that the increasing numbers of female service members in the US military were weakening the US armed forces.

During his show, Carlson showed an Air Force photo of a 1st lieutenant modeling a maternity uniform, calling the uniform a “mockery of the US military.”

“While China’s military becomes more masculine as it’s assembled the world’s largest navy, our military, as Joe Biden says, needs to become more feminine — whatever feminine means anymore since men and women no longer exist,” Carlson said, [NBC News reported](#). “The bottom line is it’s out of control and the Pentagon is going along with it. Again, this is a mockery of the US military and its core mission, which is winning wars.”

Responding on Thursday, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said it was proud of its military's diversity, and would not be taking advice from a “talk show host or the Chinese military.”

“Maybe those folks feel like they have something to prove, that’s on them,” Kirby added. “We know we’re the greatest military in the world today, and even for all the things we need to improve.”

Kirby also said he hoped Carlson would “realize the mistake he made and express some regret about the manner in which he essentially demeaned the entire US military and how we defend and how we serve this country.”

Several active military members, veterans and veterans groups also slammed Carlson’s comments.

“I served with women who risked their lives to protect our country. Tucker did not,” Rep. Mikie Sherrill, D-NJ, a former Navy helicopter pilot, wrote in a tweet. “While he denigrates those who serve, our military remains the best fighting force due, in large part, to our amazing servicewomen.”

Scott Stalker, command senior enlisted leader of the US Space Command, also called Carlson’s comments “drama TV” on Twitter, stating that Carlson’s statements were based on “zero days” of service.

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US Veteran Charged in Capitol Insurrection Once Served in Marine One Unit  
by [Mary F.](#)

Former US president Donald Trump loyalists breached the Capitol building in Washington, DC on January 6 to protest against the certification of Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election by the Electoral College.

John Daniel Andries, 35, was charged with two felonies last month in connection with the Capitol riots. Andries has pleaded not guilty.

Service records obtained this week by [The Washington Post](#) reveal that Andries once served as a crew chief for the presidential helicopter squadron, known as the Marine One, under former US presidents George Bush and Barack Obama.

All the squadron's members are required to have a top-secret clearance as well as a special higher-level clearance known as Yankee White. Individuals who receive the Yankee White clearance undergo extensive background checks.

Andries, who served in the Marines from 2004 to 2009, first joined the Marine Helicopter Squadron One in 2006. His records also show that he left the Marine Corps in November 2009 as a lance corporal with no combat deployments.

According to prosecutors, Andries, who is facing charges of knowingly entering a restricted building without lawful authority as well as violent entry and disorderly conduct, broke into the Capitol building on January 6 through a window. Andries was charged after a tipster recognized him on news footage.

An [FBI affidavit](#) obtained by the Huffington Post last month also revealed that Andries was seen in a crowd that was "attempting to push past US Capitol Police officers."

"At one point, Andries turns to the crowd and waves his arms in a back-and-forth motion," the affidavit adds.

More than 30 veterans have been charged with crimes in connection with the riot. According to [The Washington Post](#), many of those veterans were infantry members, vehicle drivers and mechanics. One of those charged includes Thomas Caldwell, who once served as a Navy Reserve intelligence officer.

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Campaign to Recall California's Governor Newsom Claims Over 2 Million Signatures  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While essentially every California governor in recent decades has faced some kind of recall effort, only one has actually been removed from office, and analysts have noted the trends visible in his downfall are largely absent from the present effort.

A movement to push California Governor Gavin Newsom from office is gaining steam, claiming on Thursday to have received more than 2 million signatures supporting the effort. If at least 1.5 million are verified, Newsom could face a vote on whether he should be forced to step down.

"The People of California are speaking loud and clear. We have cleared another milestone. Politics as usual in California are over as we know it to be," Orrin Heatlie, Chairman of The California Patriot Coalition RecallGavin2020 Committee, said in a [Thursday news release](#) announcing the group had received 2,060,000 signatures.

The group has until March 17 to submit at least 1.5 million signatures verified to have been made by registered California voters; they claim to have 1.8 million already verified through a “third party vendor internal verification process,” but the final determination will be made by county election offices. If they’re successful, Newsom will be subjected to an up-or-down vote in [a statewide referendum](#) on his removal from office.

If it goes to a vote, it’s unclear what the outcome will be: [a public opinion poll](#) published by the Public Policy Institute of California last month found that 43% of California voters disapprove of Newsom’s job performance - a steady increase upward from the Spring of 2020.

The institute notes that his disapproval rating still sits far below that of Gray Davis, the only California governor to ever be successfully removed via recall vote. His disapproval rating hovered in the mid-70s before just 55% of California voters recalled him in 2003 as part of the fallout of the Enron scandal and the state’s electrical brownout problem.

According to the [Los Angeles Times](#), the movement to oust Newsom is a strange agglomeration of forces generally grouped around supporters of former US President Donald Trump. Some of its primary bankrollers [include John Kruger](#), an Orange County entrepreneur angry about how Newsom’s indoor gathering restrictions during the pandemic have limited church services; billionaire developer and Trump campaign [bankroller Geoffrey Palmer](#); the Silicon Valley billionaire founder of Sequoia Capital, [Douglas Leone](#); and [Chamath Palihapitiya](#), another Silicon Valley venture capitalist and former Facebook executive who feels taxes are too high and might be eyeing his own run for Newsom’s seat.

Others who have been more explicit in seeking to succeed Newsom include Republicans John Cox, who lost to Newsom in the 2018 election, and the former two-term mayor of San Diego, Kevin Falconer.

The movement has also accumulated various disgruntled citizens angry about the COVID-19 vaccine rollout’s problems, that the state is providing aid to Latin American migrants they feel should be going to homeless Californians, and other niche issues that have arisen or been exacerbated during the pandemic.

[On Tuesday, Newsom](#) briefly addressed the growing recall movement during an unusual State of the State address given in an empty Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, accusing those backing it of “promoting partisan political power grabs with outdated prejudices.” However, he spent much of the speech laying out a defense of his actions over the past year, including admitting to some “mistakes” but saying “we own them, we learn from them, and we never stop trying.”

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Ahead of 2+2 Alaska Talks, Beijing Hopes for Dialogue as Washington Assumes Tough Posture by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A week ahead of a bilateral summit in Alaska, Chinese and American diplomats are striking very different tones about what they hope to accomplish at the meeting, which will be the first since US President Joe Biden took office in January.

On March 18 and 19, a “2+2” meeting will take place in the Alaskan port city of Anchorage between Chinese and American diplomats at Washington’s request. Yang Jiechi, the Communist Party of China’s foreign affairs chief, and Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi will meet with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

Beijing Looks for ‘Multi-Tiered Dialogue’

“As the world’s largest developing and developed countries, China and the United States both stand to gain from cooperation and lose from confrontation,” Chinese Premier [Li Keqiang told reporters](#) on Thursday. “The two sides need to have dialogue and exchanges based on mutual respect and equality. We hope to see dialogue in multiple areas and at various levels. Even if we cannot work things out anytime soon, such exchange of views will help boost trust and dispel misgivings. It will also help us better manage and mitigate our differences.”

His comments come after the closing of the annual session of the National People’s Congress, China’s national legislature, which verified various proposals for economic, social, and military programs before passing them off to state agencies for implementation. [The Global Times noted](#) that while the premier typically doesn’t comment on foreign affairs, the head of government spoke about them on Thursday because “China-US relations are the most consequential ties in the world and will have an impact on China’s own development.”

Zhang Jiadong, an international relations professor at Fudan University, told the [South China Morning Post](#) that “What China wants the most from the meeting is not tangible outcomes, but an overall framework and a sense that the two sides can keep talking. Whether there will be follow-up talks will be the key thing to watch.”

Beginning with US President Barack Obama, the US has increasingly shifted its foreign policy toward Asia, with US President Donald Trump pushing a trade war with Beijing as his administration labeled it a “malign actor,” and declared “great power competition” with China and Russia was Washington’s new strategic priority. However, rather than tack a different course than his predecessor, as he has claimed to do on many other issues, Biden seems to be doubling down on pressuring China.

Blinken to Push Hard on Xinjiang

Blinken’s meeting will follow talks with US regional allies, including Japan and South Korea, with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, according to [Voice of America](#). Austin will also be joining Biden in a virtual conference with the heads of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or “Quad” group, which includes Japan, India and Australia, before [traveling to those nations](#) for larger talks. Washington sees the bloc as a counterpoint to Chinese foreign policy in the region.

Speaking about the upcoming meeting to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on Wednesday, Blinken said the meeting is “an important opportunity for us to lay out in very frank terms the many concerns that we have with Beijing’s actions and behavior that are challenging the security, prosperity and the values of the United States and our partners and allies.”

One of Blinken’s primary focal points will be alleged human rights abuses of Muslims in China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region, which have become a new point of [ideological leverage](#) against Beijing since Biden took office.

“If they have nothing to hide, show it to us, show the world,” Blinken said, promising sanctions and visa restrictions likely awaited “those directly responsible for acts of genocide.” The allegations are based almost exclusively [on debunked claims](#) by German anthropologist Adrian

Zenz, a member of the far-right group "Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation" who now [faces a lawsuit](#) from Xinjiang companies who have alleged to have suffered reputational and financial losses thanks to his Holocaust-like accusations.

China has [pushed back on](#) the claims of genocide, which include supposed "re-education camps" and forced sterilization campaigns, saying the institutions are vocational centers set up in accordance with UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism guidelines. Their actions follow the rise of terrorist separatist groups such as the Turkestan Islamic Party, an al-Qaeda-linked militia responsible for a string of terrorist attacks across China, including in Kashgar in 2008 and Urumqi in 2009, the latter of which killed 197 people and injured more than 1,700 others. The group has dispatched thousands of [fighters to Syria's Idlib](#) and a closely related group, the World Uyghur Congress, [has enjoyed support](#) from the CIA-linked National Endowment for Democracy.

US State Department spokesperson [Ned Price further](#) noted on Thursday that Blinken would bring up the explosive issues of Hong Kong, Taiwan, the [South China Sea](#), and the [origins of SARS-CoV-2](#), the virus that causes COVID-19.

Still, Blinken said the diplomats would "also explore whether there are avenues for cooperation, and we'll talk about the competition that we have with China to make sure that the United States has a level playing field and that our companies and workers benefit from that," adding that "There's no intent at this point for a series of follow-on engagements. Those engagements, if they are to follow, really have to be based on the proposition that we're seeing tangible progress and tangible outcomes."

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Biden Signs American Rescue Plan Act, With \$1.9 Trillion in COVID-19 Relief  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden signed into law the American Rescue Plan Act, a \$1.9 trillion bill providing wide-ranging financial relief for problems created by COVID-19 pandemic-related shutdowns and interruptions.

Speaking in the Oval Office immediately prior to signing the bill, Biden said its contents were "immediately reflective" of the input of Democrats, Republicans, and the American people.

"I believe this is - and most people do I think as well - this historic legislation is about rebuilding the backbone of this country and giving the people of this nation - working people, middle-class folks, people who built the country - a fighting chance," Biden said. "That's what the essence of it is."

He noted that beginning on Thursday night and through the coming days, he would be promoting various aspects of the bill and explaining them to the American public.

The House [gave final approval](#) to the huge spending bill on Wednesday, passing it in a vote nearly along party lines. The act [provides funding for a slew of programs](#) ranging from COVID-19 vaccination programs and making schools safer for reopening to bolstering the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and sending direct cash payments to families.

The White House said on Wednesday Biden would appoint someone to oversee implementation of the bill, but no announcement has yet been made on who that will be.

US [stock market indices](#) saw big gains this week, including on Thursday, on news that most Americans would have as much as \$1,400 in spending money in the coming days thanks to the bill. However, that number has also been criticized for being much [lower than the \\$2,000](#) Biden and many of his supporters initially promised would be coming. Biden has said the \$2,000 includes the [previous \\$600 dispersed](#) under former US President Donald Trump in late December and early January.

White House Press Secretary Jen [Psaki said Thursday](#) afternoon that the stimulus checks would begin being deposited in people's accounts this weekend.

Republicans have also criticized the bill for what they say is undue social spending, fearing it will result in an increase in taxes, and claiming the social support programs will discourage unemployed people to return to the workforce.

A [Pew poll published](#) on Tuesday found that about 70% of Americans support the bill, including 41% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independent voters. However, only about 41% of Americans view the spending total as ideal: 25% say it spends too little, while 33% say it spends too much.

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Venezuela Accuses UN Commissioner Bachelet of 'Losing Her Rigor' in 'Unbalanced' Report by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While a damning report last month by a United Nations human rights expert called attention to the catastrophic effects of economic sanctions against Venezuela, a new report by the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights ignores those findings, faulting the government for the effects of the sanctions and other meddling by foreign powers.

The Venezuelan Foreign Ministry has fired back after the United Nations' human rights chief heavily criticized the country's internal situation in a report, saying the liaison has fallen victim to false narratives from anti-government forces.

"Venezuela regrets and rejects the misleading statements of the High Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, at the 46th ordinary session of the UN Human Rights Council," Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza tweeted on Thursday. "It is worrying that the High Commissioner will lose her rigor and objectivity in the face of pressure from anti-Venezuelan actors."

In the statement, Arreaza accuses Bachelet of filing an "unbalanced" report catered to the demands of the United States and the "self-styled" Lima Group, a collection of Latin American nations with right-wing governments dedicated to achieving regime change in Venezuela.

In January 2019, then-US President Donald Trump provided extensive political and financial backing to Juan Guaido, an opposition politician who declared himself to be Venezuela's interim president and mounted several coups d'etat attempts. Despite months of violence and the imposition of crushing economic sanctions, Guaido's movement failed to generate significant support. Nonetheless, dozens of nations, most of them European, have recognized Guaido's

claims, with the administration of US President [Joe Biden reaffirming them](#) after taking office earlier this year.

#### Bachelet Names Problems, But Not Causes

The sanctions have cut off the oil-exporting nation from nearly all of the income it would use to buy food, medicine, and other supplies, as well as attacked the [government's primary mechanism](#) for guaranteeing affordable and equitable food distribution, creating a humanitarian situation that Bachelet called attention to in her report without naming the cause.

"Since September, the access to basic services like medical assistance, water, gas, food, petrol, has continued to be scarcer, and was further limited by the effect of the pandemic," she told the UN High Council on [Human Rights on Thursday](#). "This contributed to sparking social protests, and severely compounded the humanitarian situation."

"Some associations report that average wage would now be under 1 US dollar per month while the price of the food basket is estimated to have increased by 1,800% over the last year. About one third of Venezuelans would now be living in a situation of food insecurity," Bachelet added. Her report likewise called attention to people detained by Venezuelan police, including several activists charged with money laundering and terrorism, and a "shrinking civic space."

Some of the more recent attacks on Venezuela's economy have been [against its fuel sector](#), with the US seizing oil purchased from Iran and selling it instead of allowing it to be delivered to its Venezuelan buyer, and Washington has also clamped down on "swap agreements" that saw Venezuela trade crude oil for refined products.

Bachelet's report follows the same pattern [that Sputnik documented](#) in July 2019: faulting only the Venezuelan side of the conflict and ignoring the causes of shortages as well as [political violence](#).

#### Separate UN Report Slams Sanctions

While Bachelet failed to name sanctions as the cause, [another top UN official](#) called direct attention to the destructive effects of the de facto embargo. Alena Douhan, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights, flatly called them a violation of human rights and of the "principle of sovereign equality of states."

"Unilateral sanctions increasingly imposed by the United States, the European Union and other countries have exacerbated the above mentioned challenges. The Government's revenue was reported to shrink by 99% with the country currently living on 1% of its pre-sanctions income," [Douhan wrote](#). She added that the resulting four years of hyperinflation "have resulted in the total devaluation of the national currency," which has caused public sector salaries to shrink considerably and contributed to "a growing poverty level."

In the aftermath of Douhan's report, [Maduro took his case](#) to the UN Human Rights Council directly, traveling to Geneva to appeal for relief from US sanctions, which he said "demonstrate great cruelty."

Days after Douhan's report hit, a group of progressive Democratic lawmakers also sent [a letter to Biden](#) urging him to drop the sanctions amid "catastrophic humanitarian consequences," especially relating to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even the US Congress' own Government Accountability Office has found serious humanitarian faults with US sanctions, noting they were partially responsible for imploding the Venezuelan economy in a [report also published](#) last month.

In 2019, before the worst sanctions had been imposed on Venezuela, a report from the Center for Economic and Policy Research ([CEPR](#)) [think tank found](#) US sanctions had already caused 40,000 excess deaths and noted hundreds of thousands more in vulnerable groups whose medicinal supplies had run dry, including people with HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and cancer.

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Biden Administration Announces Four Nominees to Round Out Key US Treasury Posts  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, Janet Yellen was sworn in as the Biden administration's Treasury secretary, marking her as the first woman to hold the post. Having been confirmed by a large bipartisan majority of the Senate, Yellen's newly-acquired role will see her spearhead the White House's response to the COVID-19-related recession.

US President Joe Biden revealed on Tuesday that he would be nominating four individuals to execute key posts of the US Department of Treasury, in an effort to round out the unfilled positions at the agency.

The [announcement](#), which came as the administration is preparing to implement its \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package, indicated that the Biden White House intended to fill posts for the Treasury's undersecretary for domestic finance and assistant secretaries for tax policy, economic policy and legislative affairs.

Filing the undersecretary post would be Nellie Liang, a former official with the Federal Reserve who would help to bolster Yellen's team of professionals intended to create policies that will allow a tougher oversight of Wall Street.

According to [Bloomberg News](#), despite not yet being confirmed for the role, Liang has already taken up efforts to assist Yellen by serving as the "point person for cross-agency discussions" regarding regulation and stability. Specifically, Liang reportedly took part in talks over the social media-driven GameStop market fiasco that unfolded earlier this year.

With over 30 years of experience under the Federal Reserve, Liang most notably served as the US central bank's director of the financial stability division between 2010 and 2017, and worked to develop regulations with a focus on risks related to financial firms and markets.

Liang's position as director was created in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which was primarily prompted by the vast deregulation that allowed banks to participate in hedge fund trading, a move that ultimately backfired and left homeowners owing more on their mortgages than they were actually worth.

Liang has played a central role in designing one of the first so-called "stress tests" that paved the way for helping to restore confidence in the banking sector following the 2008 crisis. Since parting with the Federal Reserve in 2017, Liang has remained a key critic of the deregulation practices that the central bank took up under the Trump administration.

In fact, under the Trump White House, Liang was nominated to serve on the Federal Reserve's board of governors in late 2018 but [eventually withdrew](#) herself from consideration over

concerns that the prolonged confirmation process would have left her in “professional limbo for too long.”

Among the list of Biden’s nominees is also Lily Batchelder, who is expected to play a pivotal role in outlining US tax regulations if confirmed to serve as the assistant secretary for tax policy.

Under the Obama administration, Batchelder served as the deputy director of the White House National Economic Council from 2014 to 2015, specifically working on tax matters related to reform, low-income benefits and retirement policies.

Batchelder also worked on Capitol Hill from 2010 to 2014 as the majority chief tax counsel on the Senate Committee on Finance. Throughout her career, Batchelder has long been an advocate for using the tax code to ease income inequality and strengthening the estate tax. Batchelder has most recently served under Biden’s transitional team with the US Treasury, and worked as a professor with New York University’s School of Law and Wagner School of Public Service.

In addition to Liang and Batchelder, Ben Harris has been nominated to serve as the assistant secretary for economic policy, with Jonathan Davidson taking on the role of assistant secretary for legislative affairs.

Harris previously worked as the senior economic adviser during Biden’s campaign, and when Biden held the vice presidency role under the Obama administration. He also held the senior economist role with the Council of Economic Advisers.

As for Davidson, he has worked on Capitol Hill for over 20 years, and most recently worked with the Biden transition team on the confirmation of economic nominations. During his time at the Capitol, Davidson took up the chief of staff position when working for Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO).

Yellen remarked in a [Wednesday statement](#) that the nominations of Liang, Batchelder, Harris and Davidson will be “key” to doing “all they can to accelerate the recovery” of the US economy in the wake of the [recent passage](#) of COVID-19 relief package.

“They have devoted their careers to the work of strengthening the American economy and have done it with integrity. Given their extensive qualifications, I look forward to their confirmations,” Yellen added.

All four positions will be subject to Senate confirmations.

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New York Assembly Authorizes Impeachment Probe Against Cuomo Amid Sexual Misconduct Reports

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Recently, New York's Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo came under fire after multiple reports surfaced accusing the state leader of sexual harassment. Allegations against Cuomo suggest he made inappropriate sexual remarks to several former aides, even going as far as asking one woman whether she had been involved with older men.

The New York Assembly announced late Thursday that it had taken its first steps toward initiating procedures to kick off an impeachment investigation against Cuomo amid the recent concerning allegations.

Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie revealed in [release](#) that he had authorized the Assembly Judiciary Committee to open an impeachment probe against Cuomo, highlighting that it will look into both the sexual harassment allegations and the COVID-19-related deaths that went unreported at state [nursing homes](#).

"The reports of accusations concerning the governor are serious," Heastie noted in the statement. "The committee will have the authority to interview witnesses, subpoena documents and evaluate evidence, as is allowed by the New York State Constitution."

"I have the utmost faith that Assemblymember Lavine and the members of the committee will conduct an expeditious, full and thorough investigation," Heastie added.

The probe will be led by Chair Charles D. Lavine, and "will not interfere" with the [independent investigation](#) being carried out by New York Attorney General Letitia James, according to the release.

To date, more than half of the [state legislators](#) have called on Cuomo to resign from his post in light of the increasing sexual harassment allegations. Earlier Thursday, a groping incident allegedly involving Cuomo was referred to the Albany Police Department.

In a [subsequent response](#) to the development, James reiterated that the legislature's probe "will have no bearing" on her office's investigation, which is being headed by both employment discrimination attorney Anne Clark and Joon Kim, who previously served as the acting US attorney for the Southern District of New York.

The latest development came after New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio joined calls urging Cuomo to resign as new allegations surfaced from a sixth accuser. At the time, de Blasio referred to the allegations as "absolutely unacceptable" and "disgusting."

"He can no longer serve as governor," the mayor said in [remarks](#) to reporters.

Despite the growing calls over the pair of scandals, Cuomo has repeatedly stated that he has no intention to step down from his post as governor. Most recently, Cuomo rejected resignation calls during a Sunday phone call with reporters, saying that stepping down would be "[anti-Democratic](#)." He has stated that he will [cooperate](#) with investigation taken up by attorney general's office.

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'Sub-Neptune' Planet Likely Gained Second Atmosphere Through Volcanic Activity, Scientists Say

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

A so-called "sub-Neptune" world is described as a planet that may have either a smaller or larger radius and mass when compared to the ammonia- and methane-rich Neptune. Earlier this month, astronomers discovered a new sub-Neptune exoplanet situated over 343 light-years from Earth.

A team of researchers recently discovered that a distant, sub-Neptune planet lost its original atmosphere over a period of time, and oddly enough, managed to gain a second atmosphere through the process of volcanic activity.

Located just over 40 light-years away from Earth, the group of researchers identified the planet as GJ 1132 b, noting in their findings that the exoplanet is believed to have lost its initial atmosphere as a result of the intense radiation emitting from the red dwarf that it orbits.

Officials were able to come to their conclusions by reviewing observations made by NASA's Hubble Space Telescope and through computer modeling. Analysis of the records found that the new atmosphere consists of hydrogen, hydrogen cyanide, methane and aerosol haze, a compound similar to smog on Earth.

Additionally, researchers believe that the secondary atmosphere's hydrogen components are derived from the original atmosphere, which was composed of primordial hydrogen and helium. The team's analysis suggests that the hydrogen elements were absorbed into GJ 1132 b's molten magma mantle, and is constantly being released back into the planet through volcanism. The team hypothesizes that GJ 1132 b is able to keep its mantle liquid enough to power volcanic activity because of [tidal heating](#) since the planet maintains a close proximity to its host star, completing a full orbit every day and a half.

Raissa Estrela, one of the authors of the study who works with NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, explained in a [Thursday release](#) that the team initially had no interest exploring the inner workings of GJ 1132 b.

"We first thought that these highly irradiated planets could be pretty boring because we believed that they lost their atmospheres. But we looked at existing observations of this planet with Hubble and said, 'Oh no, there is an atmosphere there,'" Estrela noted.

"It's super exciting because we believe the atmosphere that we see now was regenerated, so it could be a secondary atmosphere."

Officials anticipate that the [James Webb Space Telescope](#) will be able to offer further insight into their findings, with the hope that the instrument's infrared imagery will be able to peer through the planet's surface. The telescope isn't expected to be launched into the cosmos until October.

The research analysis will be published in the upcoming edition of The Astronomical Journal

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Uber, Lyft to Share Info of Drivers and Couriers Deactivated for Physical, Sexual Assault by [Evan Craighead](#)

A 2019 safety release from Uber Technologies, Inc. detailed that a total of 5,981 sexual assault reports were filed in 2017 and 2018. According to the release, 92% of the 464 rape reports were filed by riders.

Uber [announced Thursday](#) that it would be teaming up with Lyft to launch the 'Industry Sharing Safety Program,' an initiative that "enables companies to exchange basic information about

drivers and delivery people who have been deactivated for serious sexual assault or physical assault fatalities to help prevent these individuals from operating on another platform." According to the Uber news release on the matter, both ride-share companies decided to begin sharing information about their deactivated employees to enhance patrons' safety and experience within the industry.

"Lyft and Uber will share information about driver deactivations related to the five most critical safety issues within the National Sexual Violence Resource Center's ([NSVRC](#)) Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence Taxonomy, along with physical assault fatalities," the release noted.

Workforce solutions provider HireRight will oversee the collection, management and matching of the data from individual companies to "ensure that each company is abiding by best practices and industry standards informed by sexual violence prevention experts and the NSVRC Taxonomy."

The release emphasized the "survivor-centric, comprehensive process" that incorporates teachings from "anti-sexual violence advocates over the past years" and "prioritizes safety, privacy and fairness for both drivers and survivors."

While the Industry Sharing Safety Program is in its first stages, the program is slated to be extended to US-based delivery network companies that agree to follow outlined data requirements.

"Safety should never be proprietary. You should be safe no matter what ridesharing platform you choose. We're thrilled to come together with Lyft to improve safety for the entire industry," Tony West, Uber's senior vice president and chief legal officer, said in an accompanying statement.

[The Hill](#) highlighted that while Uber released its [safety report](#) in 2019, Lyft reportedly delayed its own similar release due to the ongoing dispute between Uber and the California Public Utilities Commission regarding the rights of survivors and the release of assault data.

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New York City Mayor De Blasio Asserts Cuomo Should Resign After Sixth Woman Speaks Out by [Evan Craighead](#)

Additional allegations emerged against New York Governor Andrew Cuomo on Tuesday, with an anonymous female aide claiming that Cuomo invited her to the Executive Mansion in Albany, New York, and groped her in a sexually charged manner. The governor has denied allegations of sexual misconduct, and said details in the new report were "gut-wrenching."

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, on Thursday, joined the ranks of [politicians calling](#) for the Democratic New York governor to step down in light of several allegations pertaining to sexual misconduct and inappropriate workplace behavior.

While speaking to reporters, de Blasio, a Democrat, highlighted the recent Times Union article in which a [sixth woman](#) came forward with allegations against Cuomo.

"The specific allegation that the governor called an employee of his, someone who he had power over, called them to a private place and then sexually assaulted her, it's absolutely unacceptable," he said, as reported [by Reuters](#).

"It is disgusting to me, and he can no longer serve as governor."

The TU piece in question detailed that, sometime last year, the woman was "called to the mansion under the apparent pretext of having her assist the governor with a minor technical issue involving his mobile phone."

While they were alone in a room on the second floor of Cuomo's residence, the governor allegedly closed the door, reached under the aide's blouse and began fondling her. She reportedly told the governor to stop.

"I have never done anything like this. The details of this report are gut-wrenching," Cuomo said in a statement obtained by the TU. "I am not going to speak to the specifics of this or any other allegation given the ongoing review, but I am confident in the result of the attorney general's report."

Nevertheless, New York Attorney General Letitia James has appointed two attorneys to lead an independent investigation into the sexual misconduct allegations leveled against Cuomo.

The [embattled](#) Democratic New York governor and his administration are also facing backlash for failing to report thousands of COVID-19-related nursing home deaths in the state.

It's worth noting that de Blasio has also been called to resign in the past year, following the May 25, 2020, killing of George Floyd by [police officers](#). Though the notorious incident occurred in Minneapolis, Minnesota, it served as the catalyst for the emergence of nationwide protests against police brutality and other race-related issues.

Demonstrators in New York City called for the mayor to resign and 236 former and current de Blasio staffers demanded "[radical change](#)" in the wake of police-protester clashes in the city.

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Pentagon Awards Elon Musk's SpaceX Over \$159 Million in 'Competitive' Space Launch Contract  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Boeing and Lockheed Martin's United Launch Alliance (ULA) was also awarded more than \$224 million by the Pentagon to launch United States Space Force (USSF) missions USSF-112 and USSF-87 from Centennial, Colorado and Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, Florida, according to the Department of Defense release this week.

Under the US' National Security Phase 2 contract, Elon Musk's Space Exploration Technologies Corp., or SpaceX, [was awarded](#) exactly \$159,721,445 for two individual task orders that will "provide the basic launch services and mission integration for USSF-36 and NROL-69."

It was announced back in [August 2020](#) that SpaceX and ULA had been selected to receive "competitive" contracts from the USSF's Space and Missile Systems Center (SMC) to handle three Phase 2 missions for the Space Force.

The SMC's action is being carried out in partnership with the National Reconnaissance Office, the government agency tasked with designing, building, launching and maintaining the US' intelligence satellites.

SpaceX will notably handle the single NRO launch. The Hawthorne, California-based company's contracts are slated for completion by the end of 2023.

Together, the contracts awarded earlier this week total more than \$384 million.

"Today, we are making it possible for our National Security Space team to accomplish our mission of providing on-orbit space capability to the warfighter," Col. Robert Bongiovi, director of the SMC's Launch enterprise, said in a [Wednesday statement](#) on the task orders and contracts.

"The National Security Space Launch Phase 2 Launch Service Procurement contracts provide our customers affordability, flexibility, and extremely high reliability," Bongiovi added. "This is the second order of the five-year Phase 2 ordering period. We are very pleased with the flexibility offered by our Phase 2 providers to make the best launch choices and adjustments as we proceed."

This is not the first time SpaceX has received a Pentagon contract.

Back in [October 2020](#), the Hawthorne, California, company was awarded a \$149.1 million contract to build four satellites with a 'wide field of view.'

SpaceX [was also](#) tapped by US Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) to join the Exploration Architecture Corporation, or XArc, in developing a space-based cargo transport craft to move the "equivalent of a C-17 payload anywhere on the globe in less than an hour," according to US Army General Stephen Lyons, who heads TRANSCOM.

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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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#### Health Canada Says AstraZeneca Vaccine Benefits Continue to Outweigh Risks

TORONTO, March 11 (Sputnik) - Health Canada stands by its assessment that the benefits of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine outweigh its risks despite multiple European nations halting its use over the fears of possible adverse effects, the department told Sputnik.

A number of European states have suspended vaccination with the AstraZeneca drug as a precaution after reports of severe side-effects, including blood clots, which were allegedly triggered by the vaccine.

"Health Canada is aware of reports of adverse events in Europe following immunization with the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, and would like to reassure Canadians that the benefits of the vaccine continue to outweigh its risks," Health Canada said in a statement on Thursday evening.

Health Canada echoed the European Medicines Agency, in saying that there is currently no indication that the reported negative effects had been caused by the inoculation. The department added that no adverse reactions have been reported to it or the Public Health Agency of Canada.

None of AstraZeneca vaccine batches currently under investigation have been shipped to Canada, Health Canada confirmed.

Canadian health regulators authorized the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine along with the Serum Institute of India version of the vaccine on February 26 for use in individuals over the age of 18. However, Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) later said it is not recommending AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine for Canadians age 65 and older.

The Canadian government has secured 2 million doses of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine version produced by the Serum Institute. The first shipment of 500,000 vaccine doses arrived last last week.

Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg and Norway have suspended the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine after citizens reported side-effects following inoculation from the ABV5300 batch of the AstraZeneca vaccine. The batch in question was distributed among 17 EU countries.

A spokesperson for the World Health Organization (WHO) told Sputnik that its Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety (GACVS) was carefully assessing the reports on risks related to the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine against COVID-19.

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REVIEW - Biden Charts Path to Normalcy on Pandemic Anniversary

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden promised to make every adult American eligible for a coronavirus vaccine by May and allow small gatherings to celebrate the Independence Day on July 4 charting a roadmap to normalcy on the first anniversary of the pandemic.

Biden delivered the debut prime time televised address of his presidency exactly one year after his predecessor Donald Trump ordered to suspend air traffic with Europe in recognition of the health crisis severity.

"Tonight, I am announcing that I will direct all states, tribes and territories to make all adults - people of 18 and over - eligible to be vaccinated no later than May 1... That's much earlier than expected," Biden made the single most important announcement of his speech. "Let me be clear. That doesn't mean everyone is going to have this shot immediately but it means you will be able to get in line beginning May 1."

The president reiterated that the United States will have a sufficient vaccine supply by the end of May and vowed to maintain and surpass the current rate of 2 million inoculations a day. Biden also promised to reach a target of 100 million vaccines administered on the day 60 of his presidency, 40 days ahead of the initial target.

To this end, the US administration will more than double the number of federally-run mass vaccination centers and expand the pool of professionals allowed to administer shots to include, among others, dentists, veterinarians, medical and nursing students. Over 6,000 active duty troops to support vaccination efforts, three times of their current number.

In the coming weeks further guidance will be issued "on what you can and cannot do once fully vaccinated - to lessen the confusion, keep people safe and encourage more people to get vaccinated."

"By July the 4th, there's a good chance you, your families and friends will be able to get together in your backyard or in your neighborhood and have a cookout or a barbecue and celebrate Independence Day. It doesn't mean large events with lots of people together. But it does mean small groups will be able to get together after this long hard year," Biden said. "That will make this Independence Day something truly special, where we not only mark our independence as a nation, we begin to mark our independence from this virus."

The speech comes a few hours after Biden signed the \$1.9 trillion relief package that, as he promised, will provide enough funding for the measures he detailed.

Biden grieved the loss of 527,726 American lives, more than in both world wars, Vietnam and 9/11 terrorist attacks combined, and acknowledged many other deprivations people had to endure.

"We all lost something - a collective suffering a collective sacrifice, a year filled with the loss of life. But in the loss, we saw how much there was to gain. An appreciation, respect and gratitude... Finding light in the darkness is a very American thing to do," Biden added.

He took an aim at the previous administration for initially overlooking the crisis.

"A year ago we were hit with a virus that was met with silence and spread unchecked. Denials for days, weeks, then months, that led to more deaths, more infections, more stress, and more loneliness," Biden said.

He also condemned hate crimes against Asian Americans who were frequently scapegoated for the disease.

"It's wrong, un-American and must stop," Biden demanded.

**This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia, US Has 8,800 Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Federal Care Facilities - Health Agency**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - A total of 8,800 migrant children who came to the United States alone are in federal care facilities, a US Health and Human Services (HHS) spokesperson told Sputnik.

"Currently, there are approximately 8,800 unaccompanied children (UC) in ORR [Office of Refugee Resettlement] care," the spokesperson said on Thursday.

On February 18, there were about 6,800 unaccompanied migrant children under the care of the ORR.

HHS in a fact sheet released on March 1 said that the average length of time migrant children spend in federal care facilities is 42 days.

The United States has seen an influx of unaccompanied migrant children apprehended at the US-Mexico border since October.

Data from US Customs and Border Protection shows 9,457 unaccompanied migrant children were apprehended at the southern border in February, which is a substantial increase from the 5,858 unaccompanied migrant children apprehended in January.

Last month, influx caused the Biden administration to open a facility in Carizzo Springs, Texas, that can house up to 700 migrant children.

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**Biden Says US on Track to Administer 100Mln Doses By His 60th Day in Office**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in his first prime time speech said that the United States is on pace to administer 100 million doses of the novel coronavirus vaccine by his 60th day in office.

"Tonight, I can say we're not only going to meet the goal, because we're actually on track to reach this goal of 100 million shots in arms on my 60th day in office," Biden said.

Biden said he has directed all states, tribes, and territories to make all US adults eligible for a vaccine no later than May 1. He also said the virus killed more Americans in 2020 than three wars and 9/11.

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**US Treasury's Yellen, Brazilian Economy Minister Discuss Cooperating on Pandemic Recovery**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in a call with Brazilian Economy Minister Paulo Guedes expressed her intention to deepen cooperation with Brasilia on a strong recovery from the pandemic, the Treasury Department said in a press release.

"Secretary Yellen conveyed her intention to deepen cooperation with Brazil to address key regional and global challenges, including supporting a strong recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, fighting inequality, developing sustainable infrastructure, and forcefully addressing the threat of climate change," the release said on Thursday.

Yellen also expressed willingness to engage on an agenda to protect the Amazon and secure sustainable livelihoods for local communities, the release added.

According to the International Monetary Fund, Brazil's GDP fell by 4.5 percent in 2020 and is expected to rebound by 3.6 percent this year, although in 2022 the growth will diminish to 2.6 percent.

The United States and Brazil continue their fights against the pandemic with the US being the world leader in terms of both number of cases (29.2 million) and deaths (more than 530,000), according to Johns Hopkins University. Brazil, meanwhile, has over 11.2 million cases and over 270,000 deaths.

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### Harris Swears In Garland as New US Attorney General

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris has sworn in Merrick Garland as new Attorney General of the United States.

Harris congratulated Garland and then they bumped elbows after the ceremony on Thursday. On Wednesday, the US Senate confirmed Garland with 70 senators in favor of his nomination and 30 senators against.

Garland gave a speech to the staff at the Justice Department in which he noted an importance of the equality before the laws and rules for everybody, despite their political orientation, race, ethnicity and other factors.

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

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### Biden to Announce Deployment of 4,000 More Troops to Support Vaccination - White House

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden plans to announce in a televised address a three-fold increase to 6,000 of active duty troops deployed across the United States in support of vaccination efforts, the White House said.

"President Biden will announce the deployment of more than 4,000 active duty troops to support vaccination efforts, bringing the total to over 6,000 in all," according to the speech preview on Thursday evening.

The Biden administration will also more than double the number of federally-run mass vaccination centers and expand the pool of qualified professionals able to administer shots to include among others dentists, veterinarians, medical and nursing students.

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### Biden to Push All US Adults to Be Eligible for COVID-19 Vaccine by May 1 - White House

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will seek to make eligibility for the coronavirus vaccine open to all adults in the United States by May 1, the White House said in a press release.

"Today, in the next phase of our vaccination effort, the President will announce that he will direct states, Tribes, and territories to make all adults eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine no later than May 1st," the release said on Thursday.

The White House says Biden's plan puts the United States on a path to get closer to normal by July 4.

Biden will give a speech Thursday evening to layout his administration's next steps in combating the coronavirus pandemic.

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Canadian Deportation Process Against Ex-Nazi Oberlander Could Take Up to 2 Years - Lawyer

TORONTO, March 11 (Sputnik) - Canadian deportation proceedings against former Nazi Helmut Oberlander could be prolonged for up to an additional two years after the country's Federal Court ordered a stay of hearings, international criminal lawyer John Philpot told Sputnik.

Last month, Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) postponed proceedings against Oberlander until March 19, at the earliest, after a federal judge ordered a review, citing the defense's arguments regarding health issues and potential civil rights violations.

"It could take another year or two," Philpot said, noting that the fact the Federal Court of Canada chose to review the case is significant, considering that only 3 to 4 percent of deportation cases are reviewed.

Philpot said the review process could take a considerable number of months after the leave was granted while parties file their briefs. The case, he added, could wind up in the Federal Court of Appeal, should a Federal Court justice rule the case a "significant legal issue," which could exceed the length of the initial review.

If the case was taken up by the Supreme Court, Philpot added, the process could last three to four years. However, he assessed this to be an unlikely scenario.

The veteran attorney said the defense's strategy is to prolong the case until the 96-year-old's death.

Federal Court of Canada Justice Richard Southcott, who ordered the review, sided with Oberlander's lawyers that the procession would have a debilitating impact on the former Nazi's health and that his hearing disability combined with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic could impair his ability to comprehend and respond to the questions. The lawyers also raised concerns about an alleged abuse of process, violations of Oberlander's Charter rights and the ineffectiveness of any judicial reviews if the admissibility hearings are allowed to proceed.

Philpot added that Oberlander's advanced age and numerous reported ailments could make his deportation "problematic." He, however, downplayed the possibility of COVID-19 playing a significant role in the decision, explaining that someone of Oberlander's age has either been immunized against the disease or will be inoculated in the near future.

Philpot also underscored the foreign policy aspect of the case, saying that Canada's poor standing in the international community – citing Canada's failed bid at a United Nations Security Council seat, support for failed Venezuelan coup leader Juan Guaido and close alignment with US foreign policy – is influencing its effort to deport an individual like Oberlander.

"I think what Canada, maybe, is trying to do is curry favor with the international community by deporting Nazis," Philpot said.

However, Philpot noted that the country's foreign policy-based immigration system is responsible for allowing Oberlander safe haven in Canada in the first place. The international criminal lawyer purported that in the aftermath of the Second World War, Canadian officials either didn't care who entered to country or tacitly abated the admission of ex-Nazis as a means of undermining the union movement.

Federal Court of Canada Justice Richard Southcott and that his hearing disability combined with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic could impair his ability to comprehend and respond to the questions. The lawyers also raised concerns about an alleged abuse of process, violations of Oberlander's Charter rights and the ineffectiveness

While allowing a stay of proceedings, Southcott did throw out a motion from Oberlander's defense team to suspend the hearings until the leave and the potential judicial review of the case are completed, with the justice stating that the application did not meet the "exceptional circumstance" threshold and ruling that the IRB's Immigration Division has jurisdiction to hear the case.

In December, an IRB adjudicator ruled that Oberlander's admissibility hearings could commence in January citing the numerous delays in the case and dismissing the defense's assertions that COVID-19 restrictions could impair the former SS member's communication with his legal counsel.

The IRB had previously consented to a number of procedural accommodations, including attending hearings via teleconference and appointing Oberlander's daughter as his designated representative due to his numerous ailments.

Legal representatives for Oberlander declined or did not respond to requests for an interview. The 96-year-old Oberlander has been embroiled in legal battle with the Canadian government since 1995, when the latter began trying to strip Ukrainian-born ex-SS member of his citizenship, citing his failure to disclose his links to death squads. After a lengthy legal battle, Oberlander was stripped of his citizenship for the fourth time and final time in 2017 and Canada's Supreme Court issued a ruling last December that blocked any possibility for Oberlander to appeal this decision.

An adjudicator ruled in October that the IRB has the jurisdiction to pursue the deportation of Oberlander, concluding that no abuse of process had occurred.

Additionally, Oberlander faces legal scrutiny in Russia, where investigators say that Oberlander was complicit in the World War II massacre of 27,000 civilians, including orphaned children, in Russia's Rostov region. Federal Security Service (FSB) files obtained by Sputnik revealed that Oberlander, a former interpreter for the Sonderkommando SS-10A death squad, played a role in the massacre.

Russia's Investigative Committee has sent a request to the Canadian authorities to provide legal materials related to the probe of Oberlander's role in the massacre.

However, in an interview with Sputnik in December, the Russian Embassy in Ottawa said the Canadian government did not request documents related to the case and has refused to cooperate despite Moscow's request for legal assistance. The Russian Embassy added that "influential defenders" are working to delay former Nazi's deportation process.

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Harris, WTO Chief Agree to 'Accelerate Momentum' in Global Economy - White House

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris and new World Trade Organization (WTO) Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala discussed boosting global commerce and combating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the White House said in a readout of the conversation.

"Vice President Kamala Harris spoke today with Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General of the World Trade Organization," the readout said on Thursday. "[They] committed to work closely together to accelerate momentum in the global economy for the benefit of all.

Harris congratulated the Director-General and offered her strong support as the global community works toward recovery from the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the readout said. They also discussed the need for reforms within the WTO to maximize its effectiveness for the future, it added.

"They committed to work together to address the economic and health consequences of COVID-19 and climate change, and to prioritize resilience in the global supply chain. ... [and] agreed on the importance of using trade to promote equity and economic growth," the White House said.

Okonjo-Iweala is a Nigerian-American economist and international development expert who has served since March 1 as the WTO's director-general. She is the first woman and the first African to hold the office.

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New York Legislature Approves Impeachment Probe of Sexual Allegations Against Cuomo

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - New York Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie said he has authorized an impeachment investigation into allegations of misconduct against Governor Andrew Cuomo.

"After meeting with the Assembly Majority Conference today, I am authorizing the Assembly Judiciary Committee to begin an impeachment investigation, led by Chair Charles D. Lavine, to examine allegations of misconduct against Governor Cuomo," Heastie said on Thursday evening.

New York Attorney-General Letitia James' office is currently investigating multiple complaints of sexual harassment brought against Cuomo.

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### Lockheed Martin Wins \$1.5Bln Missile Testing Contract Boost - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 12 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin Space has won a US Navy \$1.53 billion modification contract to design, develop, build and integrate equipment for missile flight test demonstrations and fielding, the Department of Defense said in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Space, Littleton, Colorado, is being awarded a ... \$1,537,874,213 modification to previously awarded and announced un-priced letter contract modifications to contract for the design, development, build and integration of equipment for missile flight test demonstrations and fielding," the release said on Thursday.

The Defense Department noted that total cumulative face value of the contract is \$2,826,155,717.

Work on the contract will be performed in Denver, Colorado; Sunnyvale, California; Magna, Utah and in other locations and is expected to be completed by February 25, 2024, the release said.

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US Court Overturns Conviction of Man Who Committed Murder on Indian Reservation - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The US state of Oklahoma lacked jurisdiction to prosecute a man who killed three tribal members on the Muscogee Creek Reservation, the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals said in a court document.

"Petitioner's victims were Indian, and this crime was committed in Indian Country. The federal government, not the State of Oklahoma, has jurisdiction to prosecute Petitioner," Judge PJ Kuehn wrote in the opinion of the court on Thursday.

The court said the judgement and sentence of Shaun Bosse in the District Court of McClain County is reversed and the case is remanded with instructions to dismiss.

Bosse was tried and convicted of first degree murder and one count of first degree arson in McClain County. He was sentenced to death and 35 years imprisonment and given a \$25,000 fine for the arson count.

Kuehn said the court's decision to overturn Bosse's conviction was supported by findings that Bosse's three victims were recognized as Native Americans by a tribe or the federal government.

In addition, Kuehn said the Chickasaw Nation is a federally recognized Native American tribe that exercises its sovereign authority under a constitution approved by the US government. There is no evidence that the treaties have been nullified or modified in any way to reduce or cede the tribe's territory, he added.

In July 2020, the US Supreme Court ruled that nearly half of the state of Oklahoma is considered tribal land belonging to the Muscogee Creek Indian reservation.

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#### US Air Force Receives First F-15EX Fighter Jet From Boeing

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has received its first F-15EX fighter jet from Boeing and will soon begin testing the hypersonic-capable aircraft in Florida, Col. Sean Dorey said in a press release.

"With its large weapons capacity, digital backbone, and open architecture, the F-15EX will be a key element of our tactical fighter fleet and complement 5th-generation assets. In addition, it's capable of carrying hypersonic weapons, giving it a niche role in future near-peer conflicts," Dorey said on Thursday.

Boeing's St. Louis facility delivered the aircraft on March 10 and the Air Force will begin testing it at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, the release said.

A second F-15EX will arrive at Eglin Air Force Base by the end of April 2021, before six more are delivered in fiscal year 2023, the release also said.

The Air Force plans to acquire 144 F-15EXs as part of a broader effort to replace its aging F-15 fleet, the release added.

In July, the US Air Force and Boeing signed a \$1.2 billion contract to build the first eight jets capable of carrying more weapons than any other fighter in its class and launching hypersonic weapons weighing up to 7,000 pounds [3.5 tonnes].

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#### US State of Oklahoma Lifts Remaining Coronavirus Restrictions - Governor

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The US State of Oklahoma is ready to get back to normal by lifting the remaining coronavirus pandemic-related restrictions, Governor Kevin Stitt said in a press briefing.

"Because of the progress we've made, I'll be issuing a new executive order tomorrow. There will be no state-wide restrictions on events and Oklahomans. I'm also removing the requirement to wear a mask in state buildings," Stitt said on Thursday.

As more Oklahomans continue to get vaccines, wearing a mask should be a personal decision based on circumstances, Stitt added.

The governor said more than 400,000 people have been vaccinated for the coronavirus in Oklahoma out of a population of 4 million.

Oklahoma has reported 430,000 coronavirus cases, with 4,700 virus-related deaths, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

In the recent days, the states of Texas, Maryland, Connecticut, Mississippi, Arizona, West Virginia and Wyoming made similar announcements they were lifting the coronavirus restrictions.

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Canadian Politicians Mourn Over 22,000 Killed by COVID-19 as Country Nears 900K Cases

TORONTO, March 11 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau led a special parliamentary session on Thursday to commemorate the more than 22,000 Canadians who have lost their lives during the coronavirus pandemic.

"On this National Day of Observance for COVID-19, we remember the people we've lost," Trudeau told Canada's House of Commons.

There were a number of processions held across Canada, most notably in Quebec, which has accounted for nearly half of the country's virus-related deaths despite being home to less than a quarter of the Canadian population.

The day of remembrance comes as Canada is poised to exceed 900,000 cumulative cases of the disease. As of Thursday, Canadian health officials have logged over 898,825 coronavirus cases and 23,300 virus-related deaths.

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Medical Debt Collector, 41 US States Reach Settlement Over Hack of 21M In Americans' Data

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - A medical debt collection firm that lost personal information for 21 million in a 2019 hack reached a settlement with 41 US states, New York Attorney General Letitia James announced.

"Today's agreement ensures that the company has the appropriate security and incident response plan in place so that a failure like this does not take place again," James said in a press release on Thursday.

Between August 2018 and March 2019, an unauthorized user gained access to American Medical Collection Agency's (AMCA) computers, despite multiple warnings of a potential breach from banks that processed payments to the company, the release said.

The settlement with 41 state attorneys general requires AMCA to implement a series of security practices that include hiring a qualified chief information security officer and hiring a third-party assessor to perform a security assessment, the release added.

ACAM would also be subject to a \$21 million penalty for violating the agreement, according to the release.

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## Trudeau Doubles Down on Claim His Gov't Handled Misconduct Allegations Appropriately

TORONTO, March 11 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau doubled on his assertion that he and his government handled misconduct allegations against the country's former top soldier appropriately.

Former Chief of Defense Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance is being investigated by the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service after two former female subordinates came forward with allegations of sexual misconduct, including during his time as the country's commanding officer. The Prime Minister, who has previously vowed to take a zero-tolerance approach for sexual misconduct allegations in his government, is facing backlash from opposition parties and local media, who allege that Trudeau knew about the allegations as early as 2018.

"We have always taken seriously any allegations and accusation and ensured that they were followed up on appropriately. That is what happened in this case. The Minister of National Defense [Harjit Sajjan] instructed the ombudsperson to go to the appropriate independent authorities to be able to follow up on those issues and that is something my office was aware of," Trudeau said during Thursday's Question Period session.

Trudeau explained that no further action was taken because the ombudsmen never received additional corroborating information.

Trudeau and Sajjan both said that any probe has to be conducted by independent investigators and not political figures, when pressed by members of opposition parties about their alleged lack of leadership in the affair.

The Canadian leader has previously said that he had no knowledge of the allegations until the Global News report, that sparked the investigation, emerged. The Prime Minister admitted on Wednesday that his office became aware of a complaint against Vance in 2018 but that the nature of the allegations were unknown to him until the report in January of this year.

Vance's successor Admiral Art McDonald temporarily stepped from his post last amid a probe into misconduct allegations that, according to media reports, date back to interactions with a female junior officer in 2010.

Earlier this week, Trudeau said Canadian institutions are not "doing a very good job either of preventing a culture that tolerates harassment" or employing support measures for anyone coming forward with allegations.

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## Bipartisan US Lawmaker Group Urges Blinken to Seek Stronger Iran Nuke Deal Than JCPOA

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - A group of 24 US lawmakers, half Democrat and half Republican, wrote to Secretary of State Antony Blinken with a request that any future nuclear agreement with Iran correct weaknesses in the previous agreement.

"We urge you to work with our allies and consult with Congress in a bipartisan and bicameral fashion to outline a better, comprehensive deal with Iran that would block its path to a nuclear

weapon and blunt its global malign activities. This would help preserve the security and interests of the United States and our allies, including Israel," the letter released on Wednesday said. The letter cited numerous provisions in the JCPOA, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action as the 2015 nuclear deal is known, that they said need to be improved, "most notably, various 'sunset clauses' could result in Iran rushing to obtain a nuclear weapon once certain provisions expire.

A new deal must also provide the International Atomic Energy Agency with access to all nuclear sites. In addition, any agreement should target non-nuclear issues not in the JCPOA, such as banning production of ballistic missiles as well as Iran's support for proxy groups in the region, the letter said.

Former President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA and Iran has thus far rejected Biden administration efforts to open a new round of negotiations. Iran is demanding a US down payment with significant sanctions relief as a precondition for talks.

The letter was organized McCaul, a Republican and Democratic Congressman Josh Gottheimer, and signed by 12 Democrat and 12 Republican lawmakers.

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Human Error' Led to Security Breach at Joint Base Andrews - Air Force Internal Review

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - Human error allowed a member of the public to walk into Joint Base Andrews outside Washington, DC and board a C-40 military aircraft used to fly Cabinet members and senior military commanders, the Department of the Air Force Inspector General said in a review.

"The Department of the Air Force Inspector General's review of the February 4 unauthorized access incident at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, cited three issues that led to the wrongful entry of a civilian man onto both the base and a US Air Force C-40 aircraft on the flightline," the US Air Force News Service (AFNS) said in a report on the review on Thursday.

First, an Air Force gate guard failed to follow proper procedures and inadvertently allowed the man access to the base. Second, the automatic gate at the entry control point failed, allowing him to walk to the flightline. Third, personnel on the flightline failed to observe the man and others on the aircraft did not challenge his presence, the review said.

When the individual left the C-40 aircraft he walked toward the entry control point and was finally intercepted by 316th Security Forces Squadron personnel after someone in the passenger terminal had alerted them. The man was then arrested for unauthorized access to the flightline and turned over to local authorities, the review said.

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US Moves NORAD Support Air Force to New Space Command - Air Force

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has designated the First Air Force which has served North American Aerospace Command (NORAD) to be the future air component of the new Space Command that was set up last year, the Air Force News Service (AFNS) said in a report.

"The US Air Force has named First Air Force as the future air component to US Space Command," the report said on Thursday. "First Air Force will continue to provide uninterrupted air component support to North American Aerospace Defense Command and US Northern Command while also exercising command and control over Air Force forces supporting US Space Command."

Implementation of the move is still in its early development phases as Air Combat Command plans how to organize, train and equip First Air Force for this new role, the report said. The new air component is currently expected to achieve initial operating capability by the end of calendar year 2021, it added.

"First Air Force was the natural choice to serve as [an] Air Force component to US Space Command. In this new role, First Air Force will be better able to identify and address gaps and seams when integrating spacepower into the support of the homeland defense mission," Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Charles Brown said in the report.

The move would also inform efforts to better fuse space operations into air operations centers around the globe, Brown added.

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**House Republicans Blame Biden for Humanitarian, Public Health 'Crises' on US-Mexico Border**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - February's surge of illegal immigrants across the US border with Mexico reflects a growing crisis unleashed by President Joe Biden's elimination of existing migrant control measures, US House Homeland Security Committee ranking Republican John Katko.

"What we are witnessing of course is a Biden border crisis," Katko said, flanked by nearly two dozen Republican colleagues who took turns repeating similar criticisms of a crisis that they said the Biden administration refuses to acknowledge.

"President Biden's knee jerk reversal of productive and effective border security policy from the previous administration was a political calculation that's created humanitarian security and public health crises," Katko said.

One of Biden's first acts as president was to halt construction of a border wall, cancel agreements with Mexico and Central American nations to restrict northward migration and resume releasing detained migrants into the United States pending a future court hearing.

"Thousands of unaccompanied children, many of them not even tested for Covid, are being released into the communities," Congresswoman Debby Lesko said.

The Biden administration refuses to acknowledge that a crisis exists, and the Customs and Border Protection (CPB) agency continues to withhold data, such as the number of unaccompanied children in CPB custody.

That CPB apprehended an average of 435 migrant children per day during the previous three weeks and now has 3,400 children in custody and about 2,800 children were awaiting placement in shelters suitable for minors, according to media reports.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) -

#### US-CHINA RELATIONS

\* The United States condemned China's activities against democratic institutions in Hong Kong after the Chinese parliament passed a resolution to reform the territory's electoral system, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

\* The Biden administration expects the talks with Chinese diplomats during the bilateral meeting scheduled to take place in Alaska next week to be "difficult," US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

#### MYANMAR DEVELOPMENTS

\* UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar Thomas Andrews urged the international community to impose multilateral sanctions on the military, which has taken power in Myanmar, over multiple human rights violations.

\* The European Union is ready to adopt restrictive measures against those responsible for human rights violations in Myanmar, EU Special Representative for Human Rights Eamon Gilmore said on Thursday.

#### OPEC OIL MARKET REPORT

\* OPEC said in a report on Thursday that it has upgraded the forecast for Russia's oil and gas condensate production growth by 0.07 million barrels a day (mbd) month-on-month and now expects it to stand at 10.7 mbd in 2021.

\* OPEC also upgraded its forecast for the oil supply growth outside of the organization by almost 1 million mbd and now expects the production to stand at 63.8 mbd.

\* The global oil production in February fell by 1.3 million mbd month-on-month and averaged 92.2 mbd as the OPEC+ countries are slashing production in order to keep the oil market balanced, OPEC said.

\* The compliance of the OPEC participants in the OPEC+ oil cuts agreement last month grew to 124 percent from January's 108 percent as Saudi Arabia is contributing additional voluntary production cuts, according to OPEC report data.

#### CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

\* US President Joe Biden on Thursday signed the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill into law a day earlier than planned, following its swift approval on Wednesday by the House of Representatives.

\* The European Commission granted conditional marketing authorization for the fourth coronavirus vaccine in the EU, this time from Johnson & Johnson's pharmaceutical division Janssen-Cilag, European Commissioner for health Stella Kyriakides said.

\* AstraZeneca believes its vaccine is well-tolerated, as it was confirmed in the third phase of clinical trials, the company's spokesperson told Sputnik, commenting on recent suspensions of its vaccine in Europe over safety concerns.

\* The United Kingdom is certain that AstraZeneca vaccine is safe for use, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said during his trip to Oslo that coincided with Norway suspending the use of the Oxford jab.

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US Envoy Made Progress in Yemen Talks in Gulf, But More Commitment Needed - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking has made some hopeful progress in talks on the Yemeni war during his trip to the Gulf region, however, more commitment is required from all parties to the conflict, the State Department said in a release.

"While there is some hopeful progress, more commitment is needed from the parties," the release said Thursday. "Special Envoy Lenderking and Special Envoy Griffiths are committed to working side-by-side to push the parties to negotiate under the UN-proposed plan, which includes opening Hudaydah port and a ceasefire."

The State Department stressed that the Houthis should end their offensive on Marib as well as cease their attacks against Saudi Arabia.

"Throughout his trip, the Special Envoy engaged with leadership in all Gulf countries visited, and the Republic of Yemen Government," the release revealed. "Special Envoy Lenderking devoted extra time in Riyadh and Muscat in an effort to push the parties closer to a ceasefire."

The State Department pointed out that Lenderking's efforts were fully coordinated with the UN throughout his travel. The Department also noted that the trip concluded with a meeting between Lenderking, UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths and senior Jordanian officials in Jordan on March 9.

The war in Yemen has been ongoing since 2014 between the government forces and the Houthis, also known as the Ansar Allah movement. In 2015, the Saudi-led Arab coalition joined the fighting on the government's side.

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#### US Condemns China's Activities in Hong Kong - State Dept.

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Earlier in the day, the National People's Congress of China adopted the resolution at the final parliamentary session with 2,895 votes in favor of the reform and just one abstention.

In a statement published on the Hong Kong government's website, regional Chief Executive Carrie Lam said that Beijing implemented the initiative to adjust Hong Kong's electoral system, so it fits the so-called one country, two systems principle.

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#### Biden Deeply Concerned, Highly Engaged in Ethiopia's Crisis - White House

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is deeply concerned about an ongoing crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray region and highly engaged in efforts to resolve it, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Thursday.

"The President is deeply concerned, highly engaged on this issue. He recognizes that we have very active ongoing efforts by our diplomats to try to move it forward to a better place including getting humanitarian aid workers in with full access," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

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

Psaki added that Biden works closely with the Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who has already twice spoken to the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali to emphasize concerns about the humanitarian and human rights crises in the region.

Blinken said on Wednesday in his testimony before Congress that the situation is unacceptable and has to change. Psaki called on the Ethiopian government "to follow through on the commitments that it has made."

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#### US, European Allies Condemn Houthi Attack on Yemen's Marib - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States have denounced the offensive by the Houthis in Yemen's Marib, the countries said in a joint statement on Thursday.

"We, the governments of France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, condemn the sustained Houthi offensive on the Yemeni city of Ma'rib and the major escalation of attacks the Houthis have conducted and claimed against Saudi Arabia," the statement said. "Their determined attack on Ma'rib is worsening an already dire humanitarian crisis."

The countries stressed in the statement that the renewed diplomatic efforts to end the Yemen conflict provide the best hope to do it and called on the Houthis to use this opportunity.

"We reiterate our firm commitment to the security and integrity of Saudi territory, and to restoring stability and calm along the Saudi/Yemeni border," the statement said. "We reaffirm our strong support for a swift resolution of the Yemeni conflict, which will bring much-needed stability to the region and immediate benefit to the people of Yemen."

State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Monday that the United States considers the Houthi rebels to be responsible for Sunday's attack on a Saudi port. On Sunday, the Saudi-led Arab coalition claimed it intercepted ten drones launched by the Houthis targeting civilians. As the Houthis have recently stepped up cross-border missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia, the coalition announced the launch of a military operation against Houthi targets.

The war in Yemen has been ongoing since 2014 between the government forces and the Houthis, also known as the Ansar Allah movement. In 2015, the Saudi-led Arab coalition joined the fighting on the government's side.

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US Has No Announcement on Participation at Moscow Conference on Afghanistan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has nothing to announce at this time on its possible participation in the Moscow conference on Afghanistan next week, State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

"We have met in the past with Russia in support of Afghanistan's peace process, but we do not have anything to announce at this time when it comes to any meetings," Price said during the press briefing.

On Tuesday, Russia's special presidential representative for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov told Sputnik that delegations of the United States, China, Pakistan, the Afghan government and the Taliban movement will take part in the conference, scheduled for March 18.

Price has highlighted an important role of Russia and other countries in the region in securing and stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. He also said US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad is currently visiting the region, trying to achieve progress towards a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire.

"Any proposal that the United States would endorse... has one requirement: that would be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned at its core. We believe that this is an essential component to a just enduring peace," Price said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said earlier on Thursday that the upcoming conference in Moscow aims to boost the peace process and is not an alternative to the intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha.

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US Will Not Offer Unilateral Gestures, Incentives to Induce Iran to Negotiate - State Dept

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The United States will not offer unilateral gestures or incentives to Iran to return to negotiations over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

"We will not offer any unilateral gestures or incentives to induce the Iranians to come to the negotiation table," Price said during a press briefing.

Tehran's returning to negotiation and full compliance with the agreement is the mandatory condition for negotiation, he added.

Washington stands on the position of compliance for compliance, Price noted.

"If Iran returns to its full compliance with the JCPOA, the United States would do the same," he said. "That would be a necessary but insufficient development."

Price said Iran also needs to address all other areas of concerns with its behavior.

The Biden administration has vowed to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran and use it as the basis for further negotiations on the outstanding issues concerning Iran's ballistic missile program and its support for militant proxies across the Middle East.

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**US Urges Swift Formation of Government in Lebanon - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The United States urges Lebanese political leaders to immediately form a government to ease the economic crisis in the country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Lebanon's leaders must no longer delay the formation of a fully empowered government capable of meeting the country's urgent needs and implementing critical reforms," Price said in a press briefing.

Price said the Lebanese economy is in crisis because of decades of corruption, adding that Lebanese political leaders need to work for the common interest of the Lebanese people.

Protests involving road blockades continue across Lebanon for a week amid dismay over the protracted economic crisis. The current wave of unrest broke out after the Lebanese pound depreciated by another 15-17 percent over the past several days.

Acting Prime Minister Hassan Diab said on Saturday that the country was close to a point of no return unless a new government was formed to start negotiations with the International Monetary Fund.

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**US Expects 'Difficult' Talks With Chinese Diplomats in Alaska Next Week - State Dept.**

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"This will be a difficult conversation, will be frank in explaining how Beijing's actions and behavior challenge the security, the prosperity, the values of not only the United States but also our partners and allies," Price said during a press briefing. "On the flip side of that coin, we also will explore avenues for cooperation that are in our interest."

Price said he expects US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to raise issues concerning Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, the South China Sea, trade and the origins of the novel coronavirus.

Price explained the Biden administration expects China to demonstrate seriousness to change the tone in the bilateral relationship. The US-China relationship is multifaceted and predicated on competition, he added.

On March 18, Blinken and Sullivan will be in Alaska to meet with China's Central Commission Office for Foreign Affairs Director Yang Jiechi and State Councilor Wang Yi and discuss US-China bilateral relations.

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**Biden Signs \$1.9Trln COVID-19 Relief Bill Into Law Day Earlier Than Planned**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday signed the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill into law a day earlier than planned, following its swift approval on Wednesday by the House of Representatives.

"This historic legislation is about rebuilding the backbone of this country and giving people in this nation, working people, middle class folks, people who built the country a fighting chance," Biden said before signing the bill in the Oval Office.

Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Biden signed the bill a day earlier than expected because it had passed more quickly than anticipated in the House. Psaki added that Biden would still hold a formal signing event for the bill alongside lawmakers at the White House on Friday, as originally planned.

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.

The legislation also assists the reopening of US schools, providing \$125 billion to reopen all schools and \$40 billion to help reopen universities.

In addition, it 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 faced strong opposition from Republicans who have argued that many of its measures are unnecessary and wasteful.

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**Syria Faces Humanitarian Crisis as Over 12Mln Residents Suffer From Food Insecurity - WFP UNITED NATIONS, March 11 (Sputnik) - Syria is facing a humanitarian crisis as estimated 12.4 million residents suffer from food insecurity, the UN World Food Program (WFP) said in a release on Thursday.**

"A recent assessment by WFP and partners estimates that a record 12.4 million Syrians - nearly 60 percent of the population - suffer from food insecurity and hunger today, double the number in 2018," the release said.

The study also revealed that the number of people in Syria who cannot survive without food assistance has doubled in a year, reaching 1.3 million people, the release said.

Nearly 4.5 million people in Syria have experienced hunger and food insecurity last year, making the current humanitarian conditions the worst since the start of the crisis in the country, the release added.

The current situation in Syria is the result of several factors, including the collapse of the Syrian pound and its impact of the price of basic commodities, the ongoing hostilities and large-scale displacement, according to the release.

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US Invests \$18Mln in 4 Vehicle Efficiency Research Projects - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The US government is investing \$18 million to finance four new university research projects to improve the efficiency of vehicles, the Department of Energy announced in a press release on Thursday.

"The US Department of Energy today announced \$18 million in funding for four cutting-edge projects that will help passenger vehicles operate more efficiently, reduce energy consumption, and contribute to the Biden Administration's goal of reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2050," the release said.

The Energy Department explained the funding is part of Phase II of the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy's (ARPA-E) Next-Generation Energy Technologies for Connected and Automated On-Road Vehicles program.

The first project is a University of California Berkeley effort to use Level 4 automation to generate additional efficiency benefits in electrified vehicles. In the second, Michigan Technical University will expand its set of test vehicles to find new opportunities for efficiency and range optimization, the release said.

In the third program, Ohio State University will integrate advanced system-level optimization and control technologies to improve energy efficiency by more than 30 percent and in the fourth, the Southwest Research Institute in San Antonio, Texas, will expand its predictive eco-routing, eco-driving and hybrid power control strategies, the release said.

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Two-Thirds of Americans Approve of Biden's Handling of Coronavirus Pandemic - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - Two-thirds of Americans approve President Joe Biden's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, a new CBS News poll conducted by YouGov revealed on Thursday.

"As President Joe Biden prepares to address the nation, two-thirds of Americans give him positive marks for his handling of the outbreak overall," a press release regarding the poll said. "This includes the percentage who thinks he is doing a very good job handling it, which has jumped 11 points since last month."

Americans are becoming more satisfied with the speed coronavirus vaccines are being distributed with now only 47 percent who think the vaccine rollout is moving too slowly versus 61 percent last month, the release said.

According to the poll's results, the most popular measure of handing the pandemic outbreak was the passing of a relief package by Congress with three in four Americans supporting this step, the release added.

The poll used a nationally representative sample of 1,306 residents interviewed on March 9-10.

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**New York City Mayor Demands Governor Cuomo Resign After Sixth Sexual Misconduct Allegation**

NEW YORK, March 11 (Sputnik) - New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio on Thursday called for Governor Andrew Cuomo to resign after a sixth woman accused him of sexual harassment.

"[That] it's not one, it's not two, it's not three, it's not four, it's not five [but] six women who have come forward is deeply troubling," de Blasio told a news conference. "This specific allegation [that] the governor called an employee of his, someone who he had power over... to a private place, and then, sexually assaulting her is absolutely unacceptable. It is disgusting to me. And he can no longer serve as governor. It's as simple as that."

The Times Union of Albany reported on Wednesday that Cuomo summoned the sixth woman late last year to the Executive Mansion in Albany, New York's state capital, saying he needed help with his cellphone. When they were alone, he closed the door, reached under her shirt and fondled her, the report said, citing an aide to the governor who knew of the details.

Cuomo, who is under investigation by New York State Attorney General Letitia James, denied the report, as he had other allegations of sexual harassment and impropriety that had surfaced in recent weeks. Referring particularly to the reported incident at the Executive Mansion, a spokesperson for Cuomo said the governor had "never done anything like this" and that the allegation was "gut-wrenching".

Among Cuomo's other accusers, one alleged that he forcibly tried to kiss her while another said he effectively propositioned her for sex. The governor maintains that he "did not touch anyone inappropriately." He also says he did not mean to offend anyone with his manner or words, and apologized if he had.

Demands for Cuomo's resignation have grown in recent days, with even a billboard in Albany carrying his picture beside the words: "Resign Now!" The governor has so far refused to step

down, saying that he was duly elected by the people of New York and will not make a decision until the outcome of the state probe against him.

James is also investigating Cuomo for his initial response to the coronavirus outbreak in the state from a year ago. In that, the governor is accused of covering up the deaths of people who originally contracted the virus in state nursing homes that apparently did not receive due care under his watch.

De Blasio's call for his resignation particularly makes it difficult for Cuomo, given the importance of New York City to the state and the mayor's position as one of the senior most office holders in broader New York.

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#### Coronavirus Pandemic Exacerbates K-Shaped US Economic Recovery - Fitch Ratings

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - US labor market growth may remain stagnant even as the economy recovers from the coronavirus pandemic, with permanent, harmful consequences to employment despite near-term relief from stimulus measures, Fitch Ratings said in a report on Thursday.

"Long-term upside risk has emerged to employment in many high-wage industries, particularly information technology and health care, while many low-wage industries, particularly retail trade, leisure and hospitality, face downside risk," the report said.

Fitch pointed out that pandemic-driven shifts to the US labor market have intensified the long-entrenched K-shaped economy and may ultimately lead to "more permanent, deleterious consequences despite the near-term relief provided by government stimulus."

A K-shaped recovery is defined as one where a segment of the economy begins rebounding from recession, while another continues declining.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About 10 million of those jobs have not returned, according to available data. The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.

Fitch said stimulus aid, including the about \$4 trillion approved as COVID-19 relief under Biden's predecessor Donald Trump, had limited the knock-on effects on consumption from the recession of the past year.

"Protracted unemployment among these workers, and a secular decline in many of the key industries that employ them, are likely to constrain wage gains over the medium term," the report said. "This in turn will inhibit poorer households' consumption and participation in the economic recovery, increasing existing income inequality and potentially undermining social cohesion."

Notwithstanding these, the material increase in vaccination rates by second-half 2021 will likely lead to a significant increase in consumer confidence and spending, providing a silver lining for the economy, the report added.

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#### US Grants Compassionate Use Authorization for Hearing Device Made With 3D Printer

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - A hearing aid created by the Veterans Administration (VA) using a 3D printer received compassionate use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use in a patient suffering from a collapsed ear canal, the VA said on Thursday.

"VA was granted the ability to prescribe an experimental 3D printed audiological device specifically designed for a single patient," VA Director of 3D Printing Beth Ripley said in a press release. "The 76-year-old Veteran patient has a rare medical condition that causes the ear canal to collapse and muffle sound."

The 3D printed stent is inserted in the external ear canal to keep it from collapsing and allow sound to pass through. The device was designed and created at a VA medical center in the state of South Carolina, the VA said.

In 2017, VA launched a 3D Printing Network printing-network - since expanded to more than 60 VA medical centers - to explore possible uses of the technology in clinical settings, according to the release.

FDA's compassionate use authorization allows patients access to prototype medications, biologics and medical devices for medical treatment outside of clinical trials when no comparable or satisfactory alternative therapy options exists.

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#### COVAX to Deliver Vaccines to Palestine in Next Couple of Weeks - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 11 (Sputnik) - The Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza will receive the delivery of coronavirus vaccines via the COVAX mechanism in the next couple of weeks, United Nations spokesman Farhan Haq told reporters on Thursday.

"The COVAX facility is working to get vaccines, and we hope that that will get into the Palestinian territory in the next couple of weeks," Haq said.

According to the allocation plan, COVAX will distribute 168,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine and 37,440 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in the occupied Palestinian territories. In February, Gaza received a shipment of 20,000 doses of Russian Sputnik V vaccine donated by the United Arab Emirates. Earlier, 2,000 doses of Sputnik V vaccine from Russia were also delivered to Gaza.

Last week, Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas issued a decree extending the state of emergency due to the coronavirus outbreak by 30 days starting on March 4.

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**New York to Lift Mandatory Quarantine for Domestic Travelers on April 1 - Governor**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (SPUTNIK) - New York State will no longer require mandatory quarantine for visitors from other US states or territories beginning on April 1, Governor Andrew Cuomo said in a press release on Thursday.

"As we work to build our vaccination infrastructure even further and get more shots in arms, we're making significant progress in winning the footrace between the infection rate and the vaccination rate, allowing us to open new sectors of our economy and start our transition to a new normal in a post-pandemic world. As part of that transition, quarantine for domestic travelers is no longer required, but it is still being advised as an added precaution," Cuomo said. However, mandatory quarantine remains in effect for international travelers, Cuomo also said Residents and visitors should continue the strict adherence to all safety guidelines to stop the spread of the coronavirus, Cuomo added.

New York has reported 1.7 million coronavirus cases and more than 48,000 virus-related deaths, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

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**UN Chief Says Worried About Vaccine Nationalism, Hoarding in Wealthy Countries**

UNITED NATIONS, March 11 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in a statement to mark the one-year anniversary of the coronavirus pandemic declaration on Thursday said he was concerned to observe vaccine nationalism and hoarding of vaccines in rich nations.

"I am deeply concerned that many low-income countries have not yet received a single dose, while wealthier countries are on track to vaccinating their entire population," Guterres said.

"We see many examples of vaccine nationalism and vaccine hoarding in wealthier countries — as well as continued side deals with manufacturers that undermine access for all," he added.

The UN chief noted one full year into the pandemic, the vaccine rollout pointed to some light at the end of the tunnel. However, he said vaccines must be seen as a global public good, and the international community must unite to produce and deliver enough vaccines for all, at least doubling manufacturing capacity.

"That effort must start now. Only together can we end this pandemic and recover. Only together can we revive our economies. And then, together, we can all get back to the things we love," Guterres added.

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**Less Than 9% of \$1.9Trln. COVID-19 Relief Bill Directly Targets Pandemic - McCarthy**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The \$1.9 trillion in the American Rescue Act approved by the US House without a single Republican vote is earmarked to combat the coronavirus pandemic, but much of the funds a for unrelated Democrats' pet projects and rewards to allies of Democratic lawmakers, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said on Thursday.

"This isn't a relief bill. It's pretty much a payoff for [Speaker Nancy] Pelosi's political allies... Less than 9 percent is used to defeat the virus," McCarthy said. It includes hundreds of billions in state bailouts when ... total state revenues were roughly flat during 2020 from the year before."

McCarthy cited the example of San Francisco, a city in Pelosi's home district in the state of California, claiming the legislation will wipe out 92 percent of the city's \$630 million debt. Lawmakers on Thursday prepared to send the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill to President Joe Biden's desk for final approval after the House passed the measure on a 220-211 vote. Every Republican and one Democrat voted against the legislation.

Public opinion polls show that about 75 percent of US adults support the measure, which provides \$1,400 direct payments to individuals making up to \$75,000 annually, \$350 billion in aid to state and local governments and \$14 billion for vaccine distribution.

In an earlier briefing, Pelosi called the legislation transformative and likely the most consequential vote that many lawmakers in Congress will ever cast.

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**US House Passes Second Gun Control Measure to Extend Federal Checking Period - Vote**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representative passed along party lines a bill, House Resolution (HR) 1446 ,extending the federal check up period for all gun purchases from three days to ten days by a vote of 219 to 210 on Thursday.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told the news conference he would bring it immediately to the floor of the upper chamber for a vote.

"Mitch McConnell's legislative graveyard is over. ... We will have a vote and see where people stand. We have to get it done for the safety of our young people. We are going to win on this issue," Schumer said.

Only two Republicans voted to support the bill and two Democrats opposed it. President Joe Biden also strongly supports the measure.

":The American people are overwhelmingly [for it]. I think 90 percent are on our side and now we will vote to get it through the Senate," Schumer said.

Previously on Thursday morning, the House passed by 227 votes to 203, also largely along party lines, a federal gun control bill closing loopholes that had previously allowed individuals to buy weapons at gun shows, privately through transfers or on the Internet that they then used to commit massacres.

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US, Israel Discuss Iran During Meeting of Strategic Consultative Group - NSC

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The United States and Israel on Thursday reconvened the Strategic Consultative Group to discuss Iran as the Biden administration moves ahead with its plans to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement, US National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne announced.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan led an interagency US delegation's participation in a virtual meeting of the US-Israel Strategic Consultative Group on March 11... The two sides shared perspectives on regional security issues of mutual interest and concern, including Iran, and expressed their common determination to confront the challenges and threats facing the region," Horne said in a statement.

The Israeli interagency delegation was led by National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat. Sullivan and Ben-Shabbat agreed to continue the discussions that will include the full range of issues of interest in US-Israeli relations.

"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," the statement said.

According to prior media reports, Israel sought to lay out during the meeting its latest data on Iran's nuclear project to establish "a mutual intelligence baseline" before moving on to policy discussions.

The Strategic Consultative Group was established in 2009 and includes officials from various defense, foreign policy and intelligence agencies.

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Canada Ambassador to Russia Delivers Letter From Trudeau to Paul Whelan - Family

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - Canadian ambassador to Russia Alison LeClaire visited Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year prison sentence for espionage, and delivered to him a letter from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the Whelan family said in a statement on Thursday. "As we understand it, Ambassador LeClaire visited with Paul, spoke with [prison] Warden Denisov about Paul's mistreatment in the prison, and gave Paul a letter from Prime Minister Trudeau," the statement said.

However, Paul's brother, David, said in the statement that the Canadian embassy has not confirmed the visit.

US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan called Paul Whelan on March 4, a day ahead of his 51th birthday, David noted.

Whelan - who is a citizen of the United States, Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom - was arrested in Russia in December 2018. A Moscow court sentenced him in last to 16 years in prison for espionage last June. Whelan has denied the charges and insisted that he came to Russia for a friend's wedding. Court papers have revealed that he has frequented Russia since 2007.

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Dow Jones, S&P Indices Hit Record Highs Thursday Morning on Stimulus Approval Cheer

NEW YORK, March 11 (Sputnik) - The S&P500 benchmark for quality US stocks hit all-time peaks on Thursday morning, joining the broad market indicator Dow Jones Industrial Average in the record-high territory as equity investors cheered the passing of President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill.

The S&P500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, reached an unprecedented 3,921 points before consolidating to hover at around 3,955 by 11:36 a.m. (15:36 GMT), up 1.4 percent on the day.

The Dow hit record highs for a fourth day running, peaking at 32,653 before pulling back slightly to 32,634 and remaining up 1.0 percent on the day.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite index - which had tumbled on many days the past two weeks on concerns about overvaluation in stocks such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google - outperformed the S&P500 and Dow despite not hitting record highs. Nasdaq was up 2.5 percent at 13,392. It was only the second time in eight days that it had gained more than 2 percent.

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US House Passes Gun Control Bill to Close Checking Loopholes on Partisan Lines - Vote

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives passed by 227 votes to 203 largely along party lines a federal gun control bill closing loopholes that had previously allowed individuals to buy weapons they then used to commit massacres, but almost all Republicans in the chamber voted against it, the final tally showed on Thursday.

"It is a challenge on the conscience not to pass this legislation," US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told a press conference. "We think this should be bipartisan in the Congress as it is in the

country. ... [There is] a drumbeat across America that the change will come. We have told the survivors that we are not giving up until the job is done."

The measure, House Resolution (HR) 8, was opposed by more than 200 Republicans. It would restrict individuals to buy guns over the Internet or at gun shows around the United States without having to submit to background checks.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told the news conference he would bring it immediately to the floor of the upper chamber for a vote.

A second bill, House Resolution 1446, would extend the review period for background checks on gun purchases from three days to ten days. The Democrat -controlled House passed both measures in 2019 but the Republican majority then-running the Senate refused to consider them.

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms.

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**IMF Monitors Closely Independence of Ukraine's National Bank - Spokesman**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is closely monitoring the situation concerning the independence of the National Bank of Ukraine from the government, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice said on Thursday.

"The independence of the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU) is one of the areas we are monitoring very closely," Rice said during a virtual press briefing.

Rice pointed out that NBU's independence is key to the macroeconomic and financial stability of Ukraine. In addition, the independence and effectiveness of Ukraine's anticorruption institutions are also a requirement of the current IMF program for the country as well as an important condition for the investment and economic growth, he added.

N June 2020, the IMF Executive Board approved a 18-month \$5 billion Stand-By Arrangement for Ukraine. The new program aims to help Ukraine cope with the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. Kiev received the first tranche of a \$2.1 billion loan after parliament passed a law concerning returning nationalized banks to former shareholders and a law allowing the sale of agricultural land.

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**Numbers of Coronavirus Cases in Syria Underestimated - UNICEF**

UNITED NATIONS, March 11 (Sputnik) - The number of novel coronavirus cases in Syria has been underestimated, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa Ted Chaiban said during a virtual press briefing on Thursday.

"Inside Syria right now we've got 16,000 confirmed cases... and 1,000 associated deaths," Chaiban said. "We estimate that that's an underestimate because the number of COVID-19 cases continue to rise and there are issues with testing capacity, so clearly the numbers are higher than that."

As of Thursday, Syria has reported 16,187 coronavirus cases and 1,079 virus-related deaths, according to data compiled by John Hopkins University.

"All the countries in the region have obviously been affected and COVID-19 has not spared the internally displaced or refugees," Chaiban said.

There have been cases among the internally displaced inside Syria as well as the refugees in all of the neighboring countries, he added.

Last Thursday, Syrian Arab Red Crescent President Khaled Hboubati said Syria suffers from a lack of the PCR tests for the coronavirus that has made it impossible to ascertain the actual number of cases in the country.

At the end of February, the state-run SANA news agency reported that the Syrian Health Ministry would start providing medical workers in several provinces with coronavirus vaccines. In addition, the Health Ministry obtained a shipment of vaccines from an unnamed "friendly country," according to SANA.

Syrian Ambassador to Russia Riad Haddad told Sputnik earlier this week that Syria had authorized Russia's Sputnik V vaccine and was prepared to import an unspecified number of doses.

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#### UN Launches Global Campaign to Promote Equal Access to Coronavirus Vaccines

UNITED NATIONS, March 11 (Sputnik) - The United Nations announced on Thursday that it has launched a campaign dubbed "Only Together" in an effort to support equal access to coronavirus vaccines around the world.

"The campaign stresses the need for coordinated global action to ensure vaccines are accessible in all countries, starting with health-care workers and the most vulnerable," the United Nations said in a release.

The United Nations explained in the release that scaling up vaccine access can be reached by sharing excess vaccines, transferring technology, offering voluntary licensing or even waiving intellectual property rights.

Ten wealthy countries possess about 80 percent of all coronavirus vaccines and some of them are planning to vaccinate their entire populations in the next several months, but poorer countries depend on vaccines deliveries from the global vaccine equity mechanism COVAX, the release said.

Some 117 million people across the world have tested positive for the novel coronavirus and there have been 2.6 million virus-related deaths in 223 countries, according the World Health Organization.

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#### UN Chief Warns Millions of People Around World at Risk of Famine

UNITED NATIONS, March 11 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned on Thursday that millions of people around the world will face famine this year if no immediate action is taken to prevent such an outcome.

Speaking at the UN Security Council meeting on food security, Guterres said more than 88 million people were suffering from acute hunger at the end of 2020 - a 20 percent increase in one year.

"Projections for 2021 point to a continuation of this frightening trend. I must warn the Council that we face multiple conflict-driven famines around the world," Guterres said. "Without immediate action, millions of people will reach the brink of extreme hunger and death."

Guterres said hunger crises are expected to escalate and spread across the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, South Sudan, Yemen and Afghanistan.

"There are more than 30 million people in over three dozen countries, just one step away from a declaration of famine," he said.

The UN chief also said he was extremely concerned about the situation in the Tigray region in Ethiopia, where violence disrupted the harvest season, pushing hundreds of thousands of people to experience hunger.

To prevent famine, Guterres said he decided to establish a High-Level Task Force, led by UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock, to bring coordinated attention to famine prevention and mobilize support in most affected countries.

Guterres called on all countries to support the World Food Program and the Food and Agriculture Organization in providing \$5.5 billion in extraordinary resources to stop millions of people from dying from starvation.

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#### US Marine Expeditionary Unit Completes Amphibious Combat Rehearsal in Kuwait - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), with ships of the Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group, completed a week-long theater amphibious combat rehearsal (TACR) at Camp Buehring, Kuwait, the US Defense Department said on Thursday.

"The TACR exercise integrated US Navy and Marine Corps assets to practice and rehearse a range of critical logistics, aviation and ground combat-related capabilities, both afloat and ashore, highlighting the expeditionary and quick-response capabilities of the MEU," the Defense Department said in a press release.

Once ashore at the Udairi Range Complex, a training area outside Camp Buehring, Marines and Sailors established a forward operating base in a matter of days with everything from a

medical clinic to a full-service fuel-farm, in preparation for training, the Defense Department said.

Events that followed included live-fire practice, company attacks, fire and movement rehearsals, demolition practice, ordnance disposal training and motorized maneuver training, according to the Defense Department.

The 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit is deployed to the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations, connecting the Mediterranean and Pacific through the Western Indian Ocean and three strategic choke points, the release said.

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**US National Guard Completes 33rd Annual Mission Supporting Antarctic Research - Air Force**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - Seventy-three airmen from the Air National Guard completed an annual mission - modified due to the coronavirus pandemic - to support scientific research in the Antarctic, with a scaled back, the Air Force said on Thursday.

"The 109th AW [Air Wing] Airmen completed six missions in Antarctica. They flew three medevac missions, transported 148 researchers and support staff, and delivered 63,000 pounds of critical cargo to research stations within the continent," the Air Force said in a press release.

The 73 Airmen and three LC-130 Hercules aircraft supported the United States Antarctic research efforts as part of the 33rd year of Operation Deep Freeze, the Department of Defense's annual support to the National Science Foundation's Antarctic program, the Air Force said.

Normally, the 109th Air Wing sends six to seven planes and around 250 Airmen to McMurdo Station in Antarctic during the support season, which runs from October until March, the summer months in Southern Hemisphere. But this season, crews and the number of planes trimmed and based in New Zealand to minimize exposure to the coronavirus, according to the release.

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#### UN Human Rights Experts Call on US President to End Death Penalty - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, March 11 (Sputnik) - A group of UN experts from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on Thursday called on US President Biden as well as members of Congress to abolish capital punishment in the United States and grant clemency to the individuals currently awaiting executions for federal crimes.

"We call on President Biden to urgently grant clemency to the 48 individuals currently on death row for federal crimes," the UN experts said in a statement. "We further urge the President, as well as members of Congress, to strongly support legislative efforts to formally abolish the death penalty at federal level."

The experts said the death penalty represents an "inherently flawed" form of punishment and disproportionately affects African Americans and people living in poverty.

In addition, executions in the United States continue to be implemented following violations of due processes, such as lack of access to an effective legal defense.

The US President should direct the Department of Justice to stop seeking the death penalty and address executions handed down at the state level, the experts said.

They also called on Biden to link some forms of federal funding to alternative sentencing and explore a ban on the sale and transport of chemicals used in lethal injections.

The UN experts said they had written to the US government to express their concerns regarding federal executions that in 2020 killed 13 people over six months.

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#### UN Expert Calls on Cuba to End Intimidation of Racial Justice Activists - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, March 11 (Sputnik) - UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders Mary Lawlor on Thursday urged Cuba to end intimidation and detention of activists working to promote racial justice in the country.

"The recurrent arrests of human rights defenders on the island, the lack of access to legal representation while they are detained and the surveillance exercised by agents of the Department of State Security is contrary to international law and must cease," Lawlor said in a statement.

The special rapporteur said that Cuba has been detaining since 2017 in their homes members of the Committee for Racial Integration who combat racism against the Afro-Cuban population.

Lawlor explained the committee members were targeted frequently with limitations to their freedom of movement due to what appeared to be intelligence work and ended with harassment by authorities.

"Human rights defenders must not be subjected to reprisals because of their legitimate work to help create a civil and just society," she said.

Lawlor also noted that she was in contact with Cuba's authorities on the issue and called on the country to avoid human rights defenders becoming subject to reprisals.

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Presence of Foreign Contractors Impedes Counterterror Efforts in Mozambique – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) – The presence of the foreign military contractors in the Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique complicates the government's efforts to fight terrorism, Acting US Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Acting Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State (IS, terrorist group banned in Russia) John Godfrey told reporters on Thursday.

"We are concerned about the presence private contractors in Cabo Delgado," Godfrey said during a virtual press briefing. "We assess that the presence of those entities has not demonstrably helped the government of Mozambique in countering the terrorist threat."

Private contractors also act in other areas of the country, he added.

"Indeed, because these entities operate outside the strictures of normal international partnership, they historically tend to be less responsible with respect to things like observing human rights," Godfrey said.

Last week, Amnesty International said that a South African private military firm hired by the Mozambican government to fight an insurgency has been indiscriminately attacking civilians. More than 1,300 civilians have been killed since the start of the conflict, according to data provided by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. The United Nations estimates that the fighting has displaced 530,000 people, nearly half of them children.

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US Marines Contact Recovered COVID-19 Victims to Extend Long-Term Study - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - The Naval Medical Research Center is contacting Marines who participated in a study of the long-term impact of COVID-19 victims, which ended in November 2020, to extend the research, the Defense Department said on Thursday.

"The study is a volunteer progression-based assessment to monitor possible health-related issues as a result of COVID-19 recovery, and the team has resumed evaluating the initial volunteers," the Defense Department said in a press release

The principal investigator, Navy Commander Andrew Letizia, said the extended study will help understand "how a Marine's immune system would be able to fight off new and emerging SARS-CoV2 [coronavirus] strains," as well as long-term effects of the disease.

The first initial study was conducted from May to November 2020, and it followed Marine recruits entering boot camp for six weeks following infection, the release said.

The Navy research team is currently contacting a scattered cohort of Marines who participated in the first study for the follow-up project named CHARM 2.0, short for COVID-19 Health Action Response for Marines, according to the release.

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#### **US Judge Adds Third-Degree Murder Charges Against Officer Charged in George Floyd Killing**

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - A Minnesota judge on Thursday granted a request by prosecutors to add third-degree murder charges against former police officer Derek Chauvin in the killing of African American George Floyd.

"Murder in the third degree is reinstated as originally charged in this case," Judge Peter Cahill said in court. "This is not a decision as to the other three defendants who are set for trial at a later date."

Chauvin was already facing second-degree murder and manslaughter charges.

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#### **FEATURE - Refugee From Honduras Reveals How Situation on Border Changing Under Biden**

EL PASO, March 11 (Sputnik) - Gabriel and his family from Honduras are facing less obstacles seeking asylum in the United States under the Biden administration compared to his first attempt in 2019, which was followed with a 15-month stay at a makeshift migrant camp in the border town of Matamoros, Mexico, due to strict Trump-era immigration policies.

In late February, Gabriel and his family were among the first groups of asylum-seeking migrants allowed into the United States after the Biden administration decided to grant entry to 25,000 individuals who had pending immigration proceedings.

"The treatment from CBP [US Customs and Border Protection] when we arrived [in 2019] was rude and a bit intimidating, but now that we crossed, it was more friendly," Gabriel told Sputnik.

"The difficult thing about the US immigration facilities [in 2019] is that they separated you from your family, they yell at your children and that makes you feel bad because they are very young children sometimes and they do not know what is happening and there are shouts of mockery."

Gabriel declined to give further information about his and his family members' identities over privacy concerns.

In a press briefing Wednesday, White House Coordinator for the US Southern Border Ambassador Roberta Jacobson said 1,400 MPP migrants have been granted entry into the United States so far. US immigration authorities are processing small groups of MPP migrants each day, beginning with 25 and ramping up to 300 in the coming weeks.

Although there is no guarantee Gabriel and his family will have their asylum claims approved, he is thankful for the glimpse of hope.

"We are going to court so that our asylum application is heard, it will be a judge who defines what will happen to us, but just being here [in United States] means that we are saved," Gabriel said. "I hope the judge can see and hear our request and make a favorable decision."

US immigrant rights groups have provided Gabriel and his family with housing while he waits for his request for a temporary work permit to process, he said. Regarding novel coronavirus concerns, Gabriel noted they do not have access to vaccines but they recently tested negative for the disease before coming to the United States.

In the last 15 months, Gabriel and his family were required to wait in Mexico due to the Trump-era Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program, which required asylum-seeking migrants to wait in Mexico as they waited for their immigration court proceedings to process in the United States.

The wait in Mexico was drawn-out by the novel coronavirus pandemic that broke out in the United States at the beginning of January 2020, leading to postponed US immigration court hearings throughout the year.

"I [first] crossed to the United States on November 20, 2019 and waited 15 months," Gabriel said. "My children had a difficult time, we lived 10 months in the [migrant] camp."

The Honduran family found residence in a makeshift migrant camp in Matamoros, Mexico, a town that shares the US-Mexico border with the Texas city of Brownsville just across the Rio Grande river. The towns are located in the southern tip of Texas near the Gulf of Mexico. The region is known as the Rio Grande Valley and stretches 320 river miles, covering 19 Texas counties. For many years, the region has been a major destination for migrants seeking asylum in the United States.

Criminal organizations engaged in extortion, climate change affecting agricultural jobs, and corrupt government institutions have pushed millions of nationals from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to migrate to the United States. However, the situation has remained dire for MPP migrants waiting along the border in Mexico, where they faced extortion from criminal organizations that control major drug corridors where illicit drugs flow across the border.

"Emotionally, we were all affected and our health was a little affected at the beginning due to the conditions that were in the place: flu, cough, stomach infections," Gabriel said. "The camp was a difficult place but leaving it was very difficult because we hardly knew Matamoros and it is dangerous."

In Honduras, Gabriel worked as the manager at an appliance company and also sold food from his home to support his family, but extortion from criminal gangs left him unable to make a living for his family. He said he moved three times during his time Honduras, but was then left with no choice but to leave the country.

"I left my country because of extortion that began since 2017 and on October 27, 2019 I left because I could no longer take it," Gabriel said. "When I left it took me 23 days to arrive [to the US border]."

## LOOMING CRISIS AT THE US SOUTHERN BORDER

On Tuesday, Texas Governor Greg Abbott said Border Patrol agents have apprehended more than 100,000 illegal migrants in the Rio Grande Valley sector, which includes Brownsville and other nearby border towns like McAllen, since the beginning of this year.

The current apprehension numbers are on pace to beat the previous mass migration flow 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.

Data from US Customs and Border Protection data shows that 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.

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US Weekly Jobless Drop 6% to 712,000 Last Week - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - Some 712,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, about 6 percent lower from the previous week, as the job market continued making incremental progress amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending March 6, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 712,000, a decrease of 42,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.

The number was slightly smaller than the 725,000 filings forecast for last week by economists surveyed by US media. But the data still demonstrates that that one year into the COVID-19 crisis, the challenge of fixing the job market remains herculean.

"(The) data (is) slightly better than the expectations and better than last week, but at 712K, it is still at elevated levels," economist Greg Michalowski said, commenting on the ForexLive forum.

Filings for jobless claims stood at just over 280,000 during the week to March 15, 2020, before exploding with the outbreak of the pandemic.

The Labor Department said that continuing weekly claims — reported with a one-week lag but sometimes considered a better gauge of the labor market — slid to 4.14 million for the week

ended March 6, from a previous 4.34 million. The unemployment rate also dipped slightly, by 0.2 percentage point, to 2.9 percent.

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

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

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US Weekly Jobless Claims at 712,000 Last Week - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) - Some 712,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, Labor Department data showed Thursday, demonstrating the US job market's continued challenge in turning the corner with the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending March 6, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 712,000, a decrease of 42,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.