

Wires 09/22/20

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Facebook Removes Fake Accounts Tied to China for Targeting Trump, Biden - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Facebook said in a statement on Tuesday that it has removed two separate networks in China and in the Philippines for carrying out coordinated inauthentic behavior targeting US President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden, among others.

"We removed 155 accounts, eleven pages, nine groups and six Instagram accounts for violating our policy against foreign or government interference which is coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government entity," the statement said. "This activity originated in China and focused primarily on the Philippines and Southeast Asia more broadly, and also on the United States."

Facebook said the network was least focused on the United States, where it gained almost no following despite posting content both in support of and against Trump and Biden.

In Southeast Asia, where the network focused most of its activity, they posted in Chinese, Filipino and English about global news and current events, including China's interests in the South China Sea, Hong Kong, content supportive of President Rodrigo Duterte, the statement said.

The perpetrators in each case coordinated with one another and used fake accounts as a central part of their operations to mislead people about who they are and what they are doing, the statement also said.

"That was the basis for our action. When we investigate and remove these operations, we focus on behavior rather than content, no matter who's behind them, what they post, or whether they're foreign or domestic," the statement added.

Facebook has removed CIB activity from its platforms over the past three years and also shared its findings, according to the statement.

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UN Thanks Putin for 'Generous' Vaccine Offer, Medical Staff to Study Proposal - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is grateful for Russian President Vladimir Putin's offer to provide vaccine for the novel coronavirus to all UN staff, and the organization's medical staff will study the proposal, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, Putin in his address to the UN General Assembly offered to provide UN employees with the Sputnik V vaccines free of charge.

"We thank President Putin for his generous offer which will be studied by our medical services," Dujarric said.

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US to Invest \$122Mln in Rare Earth, Critical Minerals Exploration - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is planning to invest more than \$120 million in programs for exploration of carbon ore, rare earth and critical minerals, the US Department of Energy said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, the US Department of Energy (DOE) announced plans to make available \$122 million in federal funding for cost-shared research and development under the funding opportunity announcement (FOA) Carbon Ore, Rare Earth, and Critical Minerals (CORE-CM) Initiative for US Basins," the statement said.

Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette explained in the statement that the US government is committed to developing new technologies to extract rare earth minerals and other valuable elements.

"These projects have an important role; they will help develop a viable domestic supply of these resources while creating new market opportunities for coal," Brouillette said.

The new funding will go to the CORE-CM Initiative, which is intended to catalyze regional economic growth by exploring natural resources, according to the statement.

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US House Passes Bill to Ban Products Made in China's Xinjiang, Pave Way for Sanctions

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed legislation on Tuesday to ban US imports of products made with forced labor in China's Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region and to sanction individuals involved in labor trafficking. The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act passed with a vote of 406-3 and will now head to the Senate for consideration.

Last week, the Trump administration announced that it will immediately block the import of goods made in Xinjiang to end alleged forced labor practices.

Human rights groups have accused Chinese authorities of detaining more than a million people, mostly from Muslim ethnic groups that include Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, in a network of detention centers as part of an assimilation campaign.

China has denied the charges, saying the camps it built for Uyghurs and other minorities were for vocational and Chinese language training and not for slave labor.

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Europe Will Not Compromise With US Over Iran Sanctions - Macron

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - European participants of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will not accept US policy of sanctioning Iran, French President Emmanuel Macron said at the United Nations General Assembly meeting on Tuesday.

"We will not compromise on the activation of a mechanism that the United States is not in a position to activate on its own after leaving the agreement," Macron said in a video message.

"That would be to undermine the Security Council and the integrity of its decisions and would further exacerbate tensions in the region."

The French leader called on the international community to build a framework for useful action and fulfill the agreement.

Macron noted that the "maximum pressure" policy did not reach the goal to end Iran's destabilizing activity.

In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA with Russia, China, France, Germany, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It required that Iran scale back its nuclear program and severely downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief, including lifting the arms embargo five years after the deal's adoption. In 2018, the United States abandoned its conciliatory stance on Iran, withdrawing from the JCPOA and implementing hard-line policies against Tehran.

Earlier this year, the US tried to campaign for the restoration of international sanctions on Iran, specifically, an extension to the arms embargo, but all of its draft resolutions ended up being rejected.

On Monday, US administration announced new sanctions against Iran. Washington's envoy Eliot Abrams said the United States will expand sanctions against Tehran until the country is ready to come back to the negotiating table.

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US Likely Needs More Fiscal Stimulus to Cope With COVID-19 Crisis - Powell

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States needs another round of fiscal stimulus to cope with the novel coronavirus pandemic as economic uncertainties remain overwhelming, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said in a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

"The economy is recovering and that's a good thing but it is very hard to have any certainty about the path forward. I think it is likely that more fiscal support will be needed," Powell said when asked about the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

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

Both Republicans and Democrats, have blamed the other for the drag over the fifth installment, which has become more of a political issue ahead of the November 3 presidential and general election.

In his pre-testimony speech, Powell said US economic indicators such as employment, housing and fixed investments have improved markedly since the novel coronavirus outbreak in March, but more work was needed to restore the economy. Powell also said the Federal Reserve would do whatever it is necessary to support the nation through the crisis, by making its own loans to businesses and purchasing bonds and other assets.

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Macron Says in UN General Assembly Speech France Working on Lasting Ceasefire in Libya

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - French President Emmanuel Macron said during his speech at the 75th UN General Assembly on Tuesday that Paris is seeking together with its partners to call another meeting on Libya to establish a lasting ceasefire in that country.

"We are working together with our partners in the neighboring countries of Libya in order to obtain a lasting ceasefire and then to start a process which will allow for the peaceful resolution of conflict under the auspices of the United Nations," Macron said. "It's France's initiative to lead in the coming weeks to work with the Secretary General of the United Nations to bring together all the neighboring countries of Libya."

Macron pointed out that a recommitment of the neighboring countries is necessary in the long-term to improve the situation in Libya.

The ongoing confrontation in Libya involves the Government of National Accord (GNA) that controls Tripoli and territories in the west of the country and the Libyan National Army (LNA) that cooperates with the parliament sitting in Tobruk and controls the east of the country. The GNA is supported by Turkey and Qatar, and the LNA is backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

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ANALYSIS - Facebook's New Election Ad Regulations May Boost Biden

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Facebook's policy to remove misleading election-related information ahead of the November vote may benefit Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's campaign, experts told Sputnik.

In early September, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced that any posts using COVID-19 to discourage voters will be removed along with content that seeks to delegitimize the outcome of the November 3 election. The social media giant said the move is intended to "protect" the integrity of the election process.

BIDEN BIAS

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly warned that mail-in ballots will lead to mass election fraud. Many believe the Democrats will benefit more from mail-in ballots because their constituents are more concerned about the pandemic. Twitter has labeled Trump's tweets about mail-in ballot fraud as disinformation on several occasions.

Eurasia Center Vice President Earl Rasmussen said Facebook's approach will likely not affect the candidates equally, noting that already there are efforts to block ads against mail-in ballots. "It will be the Facebook god that will determine which ad is so called political or non-political," Rasmussen told Sputnik. "I would not be surprised if these measures favor the Biden camp more."

Such a policy may prevent some non-profit or private ads among other notifications, which Facebook may consider as politically oriented, he added.

"They obviously will be emphasizing a specific issue. What about 'Black Lives Matter' ads or for that matter 'Blue Lives Matter'? Is this not controlled media or some private company form of censorship? I think it is highly likely that numerous ads will occur and they will benefit one side or the other," Rasmussen said.

Rasmussen also said Facebook's new policy will be difficult to implement. Facebook will be able to stop direct political ads, but reposts and other issue-related ads may be hard to detect.

Political commentator Bill Boerum also believes the Democrats may gain more advantages from Facebook's new policy.

"This year, responding to social justice concerns... young people and blacks may turn-out in higher proportions than their historical performance, thus likely benefiting the Democrats. Republicans could see the Facebook measures as a veiled effort to accomplish the latter," Boerum told Sputnik.

SIGNS OF CENSORSHIP?

Republicans, including Trump, have been irate about how Twitter and Facebook have attached "fact-checking" labels to content deemed disinformation, accusing the companies of censorship. Dan Lazare, a political commentator, told Sputnik he does not care how benign or well-intended Facebook claims to be, the result is a giant step toward censorship and political regimentation. Lazare also said he disagrees with civil libertarians who may counter that none of this matters because Facebook is a private company.

"The fact is that Facebook is doing this under intense congressional pressure, which means that its actions are nothing more than government censorship one step removed," Lazare said.

"Should phone companies regulate what people say over their lines? How about bartenders and restaurateurs? Should they keep an ear cocked in case one customer tells another something that's that's untrue or misleading?"

Lazare said the answer to bad speech is good speech in terms of what is posted on Facebook and other outlets.

"If someone is spreading bad ideas, then counter him or her by spreading good ideas of your own. Rather than relying on the government or some giant corporation - do it yourself. And it

strikes me as supremely irrelevant whether bad ideas are spreading via Facebook [or] phone lines," Lazare said.

Boerum said some of these measures can be seen by some as private sector censorship, although this has been a challenge for media throughout history. The answer has been to clearly separate different types of content.

"Media is supposed to have a clear line between opinion on the editorial page and journalism and objective reporting," Boerum explained.

Rasmussen, in turn, urged people to express their concerns over the current situation.

"Facebook or any other social media company that provides a public communications platform or forum should not independently censor information or discussion," he said. "Yes, they are a private company but they are essentially providing a public service. One should be very disturbed to see actions that limit a given perspective especially if there is no hate crime, obscenity, or other derogatory public comments."

Lazare warned that the current situation is reminiscent of the "red scare" during the Cold War. "Free speech hasn't been under this much of a threat since Joe McCarthy was running riot in the 1950s," Lazare concluded.

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US Charges Woman Who Sent Ricin to White House - Court Documents

TORONTO, September 22 (Sputnik) - US authorities have charged a 53-year-old Canadian woman with making threats against the president after her ricin-laced letter addressed to the White House was intercepted by the FBI, court documents revealed on Tuesday.

Pascale Cecile Veronique Ferrier, who hails from a Montreal-area suburb, sent six additional letters to employees of penitentiaries and detention centers in Texas, according to the documents.

In the letters, Ferrier called US President Donald Trump an "Ugly Clown Tyrant" and said that she does not want her American extended family members to see Trump win a second four-year term in the upcoming presidential election. All of the letters included the signature "FREE REBEL SPIRIT," alluded to the notes as a "special gift for you" and vowed to "find a better recipe" if the letters did not have their desired effect.

The FBI was also able to trace Facebook and Twitter postings, which included the hashtag "#killTrump," back to an email address bearing Ferrier's name.

A search of criminal records in the state revealed that an individual, presumed to be Ferrier was detained by the Mission Police Department in March 2019 and subsequently transferred to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

On Saturday, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said that an investigation was underway over a suspicious letter addressed to Trump. The package was reportedly intercepted earlier in the week and two tests were conducted, confirming the presence of the deadly poison ricin.

Ferrier was detained at the Peace Bridge Border Crossing in Buffalo, NY on Sunday. The Quebec resident was found to be in possession of a loaded firearms and a knife at the time of arrest, according to the documents.

The incident has sparked an international investigation, with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, Explosives team (CBRNE) raiding a Montreal-area home related to the ongoing investigation.

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Macron Says in UNGA Speech World Cannot Be Left to Rivalry Between China, US

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - French President Emmanuel Macron said in his address to the UN General Assembly on Tuesday that the world cannot be left to witness the competition between the two great powers - the United States and China - and called for cooperation among nations.

"We need to count on the strength of goodwill because today's world cannot be left to the rivalry between China and the United States, regardless of the weight in the world that these two great powers share," Macron said.

The relations between the United States and China have significantly deteriorated, especially after US President Donald Trump administration accused Beijing of engaging in unfair trade practices and not being transparent about the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Macron noted the global community must rely on cooperation, especially facing the unprecedented global crisis caused by the novel coronavirus pandemic.

"While the only solution can come from our cooperation, the international organizations that we so very much need, the World Health Assembly, all have been accused of the complacency of being used by others," Macron added.

The United States pulled out of the World Health Organization earlier this year after claiming the body helped China conceal information about the origins of the novel coronavirus outbreak.

The WHO said its January 30 emergency declaration gave the United States sufficient time to prepare while China said it had been transparent about the virus's origins.

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Iran's Rouhani Compares in UN General Assembly Speech US Sanctions to George Floyd Killing

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in his address to the UN General Assembly on Tuesday compared US sanctions his country to the police killing of African American man George Floyd in Minneapolis in May after a police officer knelt on his neck.

"My nation, the resilient people of Iran, instead of enjoying global partnership and cooperation, are grappling with the harshest sanctions in history, imposed in blatant and gross violation of the Charter of the United Nations, international agreements and Security Council resolution 2231," Rouhani said. "The footage broadcast to the world, concerning the treatment of an African American by the US police, is reminiscent of our own experience: we instantly recognize the feet of arrogance kneeling on the neck of independent nations."

Rouhani also pointed out that US sanctions exacerbate the situation in Iran in the context of the coronavirus pandemic that hit the country hard.

On Monday, US Special Representative Eliot Abrams said the United States will expand sanctions against Iran until the country is ready to come back to the negotiating table. Abrams comments came the same day the United States unveiled new sanctions targeting Iranian nuclear scientists as well as states, persons or entities that violate the arms embargo on Iran. The international conventional arms embargo is set to expire next month after the UN Security Council rejected a US proposal to prolong it. The United States now says it considers the embargo in place indefinitely after it initiated the snapback sanctions mechanism of the Iranian nuclear agreement. Other key Security Council members, including Russia and European nations, rejected the move, claiming that the Americans lost legal rights for it after withdrawing from the nuclear agreement with Iran in 2018.

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News Anchor Chris Wallace Picks Topics for First Trump-Biden Debate - Commission

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Fox News Sunday television anchor Chris Wallace has selected the topics for President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden to debate in the first of their three nationally broadcast faceoffs next week, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) announced on Tuesday.

"[T]he topics for the September 29 debate are... The Trump and Biden Records, The Supreme Court, COVID-19, The Economy, Race and Violence in our Cities and the Integrity of the Election," the announcement said.

The first presidential debate will be held on Tuesday, September 29, at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, the announcement said.

The format for the first debate calls for six 15-minute time segments dedicated to topics announced in advance in order to encourage deep discussion of the leading issues facing the country and all the debates will start at 9:00 pm Eastern Time and run for 90 minutes without commercial interruption, the announcement added.

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Macron Calls on Russia During UN General Assembly Speech to 'Shed Light' on Navalny Case

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - French President Emmanuel Macron in his speech to the UN General Assembly on Tuesday called on Russia to share information about the alleged poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

"On behalf of collective security, I restate here to Russia that light needs to be shed on the assassination attempt against a political opponent using a neurotoxic agent Novichok," Macron said. "This clarification needs to take place quickly and without fault because we will enforce our red lines."

On Thursday, the European Parliament passed a resolution demanding that the bloc work out a list of "ambitious restrictive measures" against Russia over the alleged attempt to poison Navalny as well as strengthen the existing sanctions. The resolution reiterated its call on the European Union to stop the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project.

On August 20, Navalny fell ill during a domestic flight in Russia. He was initially treated in the Siberian city of Omsk, where the plane made an emergency landing. Two days later, Navalny was flown to the Berlin-based Charite clinic for further treatment after the Russian doctors gave a go-ahead that he could be transported by airplane.

The German government said they had proof Navalny was poisoned with a nerve agent from the Novichok group of toxins. According to Berlin, the conclusions of its doctors were confirmed by laboratories in France and Sweden.

Tests in Russia did not show traces of poison in Navalny's organism. Moscow has demanded that Germany provide evidence to back up its claims, but has not yet received any.

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Democrats Back Continuing Resolution to Fund US Govt .Through December - Caucus
Chairman

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Majority Democrats controlling the House of Representatives support a Continuing Resolution to keep the US government funded to the end of this year, House Democratic Caucus Chairman Hakeem Jeffries and Vice Chair Catherine Clark told a Capitol Hill press conference on Tuesday,

"We expect a continuing resolution to continue the current spending agreement until December," Jeffries said.

Clark agreed that the Democrats in the House of Representatives wanted to avoid a government funding crisis on the eve of the November 3 presidential and congressional elections.

"We will prevent a shutdown by passing a Continuing Resolution to keep the government open. That is the story so far," Clark said.

The current official US government fiscal year ends at the end of this month and the new fiscal year begins on October 1.

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Foreign Entities, Cyber Crooks May Try to Corrupt US Election Process, Information - FBI

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Foreign entities and cybercriminals may seek to confuse and undermine the current US national election process by disseminating false news, rumors and misleading information including on spurious websites, the FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said in a joint statement on Tuesday. "Foreign actors and cybercriminals could create new websites, change existing websites, and create or share corresponding social media content to spread false information in an attempt to discredit the electoral process and undermine confidence in US democratic institutions," the joint statement said.

State and local officials typically require several days to weeks to certify elections' final results in order to ensure every legally cast vote is accurately counted and the increased use of mail-in ballots due to COVID-19 protocols could leave officials with incomplete results on election night, the agencies explained.

"Foreign actors and cybercriminals could exploit the time required to certify and announce elections' results by disseminating disinformation that includes reports of voter suppression, cyberattacks targeting election infrastructure, voter or ballot fraud, and other problems intended to convince the public of the elections' illegitimacy," the statement said.

The FBI and CISA urged the US public to critically evaluate the sources of the information they consume and to seek out reliable and verified information from trusted sources, such as state and local election officials, the statement added.

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Rouhani Says US Cannot Impose Negotiations or War on Iran

UNITED NATIONS , September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States cannot impose either negotiations or war on Tehran, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said during his speech at the 75th UN General Assembly on Tuesday.

"The United States can impose neither negotiations, nor war on us," Rouhani said. "Life is hard under sanctions, however, harder is life without independence."

On Monday, US envoy Eliot Abrams said the United States will expand sanctions against Tehran until the country is ready to come back to the negotiating table. Abrams comments came the same day the US unveiled new sanctions targeting Iranian nuclear scientists and states, persons or entities that violate the arms embargo on Iran.

Rouhani stressed that political freedom at home is vital for Iran.

"We as the oldest democracy in the Middle East are proud of our people determining their destiny and will not trade domestic freedom with foreign interference," he added.

Washington said that it would enforce the reinstatement of international anti-Iranian sanctions, despite no backing for it at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

The international conventional arms embargo is set to expire next month after the UNSC rejected a US proposal to prolong it. Now the US considers it in place indefinitely after it initiated the snapback sanctions mechanism of the Iranian nuclear agreement. Other key council members, including Russia and European nations, rejected the move, claiming that the Americans lost legal rights for it after they left the JCPOA deal with Iran in 2018.

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US Arctic Coordinator DeHart Begins 3-Week Visit to Northern Europe - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Coordinator for the Arctic James DeHart is conducting a three-week visit to Northern Europe to advance the interests of the United States in the region, the Department of State said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Coordinator DeHart will engage in consultations with Arctic partners to further develop our balanced approach in the region and advance US interests in the areas of security, economic growth, environmental stewardship, energy, and support for indigenous communities," the statement said.

The State Department said DeHart is scheduled to visit Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark and Greenland from September 22 until October 12.

The US coordinator plans to discuss with his partners strengthening transparency and good governance as well as ensuring a rules-based order in the region through engagement in the Arctic Council, the State Department added.

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Afghanistan's Abdullah Says Most Released Taliban Prisoners Have Not Returned to Combat

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The majority of the released Taliban prisoners have not returned to the battlefield, Afghan Reconciliation Council Chairman Abdullah Abdullah said on Tuesday.

On February 29, the Taliban and the United States reached a landmark agreement in the Qatari capital of Doha. The key provisions of the deal were that the Taliban and the Afghan government release each other's prisoners - 1,000 and 5,000, respectively - and that the radical movement commits to reduce violence, as prerequisites of launching intra-Afghan talks.

"I do know that some have returned to the battlefield which is [in] violation of the agreement that they have made... But I will say that the majority have not returned to the battlefield," Abdullah told reporters.

The Afghan government and the Taliban launched peace talks in the Qatari capital, Doha, earlier this month, after both sides successfully completed a long-awaited prisoner exchange arrangement. There is no timeline on the discussions, which are the first direct talks between the two warring sides.

Abdullah said at a press conference on September 13 that the Doha peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban would be lengthy, but the two sides were aware of the Afghan people's desire to end violence as soon as possible.

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Afghanistan's Abdullah Says Atmosphere at Intra-Afghan Peace Talks in Doha 'Healthy'

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The atmosphere of the talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in the Qatari capital of Doha is "healthy," High Council for National Reconciliation of Afghanistan Chairman Abdullah Abdullah said on Tuesday.

"I should say that after 42 years of war, the start of talks in Doha I consider historic," Abdullah said. "It has started well. It continues now as we are speaking. The contact groups are meeting one another and there will be a get together of the two teams, the whole team... The atmosphere considering the background I should consider it as healthy."

Abdullah pointed out there is a sense that willingness exists among the Taliban to take advantage of that situation and contribute.

The Afghan government and the Taliban launched peace talks in Doha earlier this month after both sides successfully completed a long-awaited prisoner exchange arrangement. There is no predetermined time frame for the peace negotiations, which are the first direct talks between the two warring sides.

On February 29, the United States and the Taliban movement signed a peace deal in Doha, stipulating a gradual withdrawal of US troops as well as the beginning of intra-Afghan negotiations and prisoner exchanges. The talks were delayed multiple times as the Afghan government and the Taliban disagreed over the prisoner exchange process.

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US Sees Russia's Support for Diplomacy in Afghanistan - Envoy Khalilzad

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad told a Congress panel on Tuesday that Russia is largely supportive of American diplomacy to reach a negotiated solution to the conflict in the country.

"They have been largely supportive of our diplomacy, as indicated in the [UN] Security Council or in the discussions that they have had with the Taliban, encouraging them to agree to a

ceasefire or reduction of violence and negotiating with the government," Khalilzad said during a hearing before the House Subcommittee on National Security.

He added that, though Russia has an anti-American dimension in its approach, it shares common concerns over terrorist elements in Afghanistan, unlike Iran, where anti-Americanism, according to Khalilzad, is a dominant motivation.

"They [Iranians] would like to keep us entangled there and under pressure, suffering costs of different kinds," he said. "Iran is largely negative, Russia is mixed, in my view."

When asked about "Russian bounties", allegations of monetary awards for killing US soldiers in Afghanistan, David Helvey, Performing the Duties of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, said during the panel discussion that no proof of it has been found. "Since those reports have come out regarding Russian programs we have been looking specifically to identify corroborating information. We have not yet found it, though we continue to look for that because we want to understand the threats and be able to address them," he said. The United States and the Taliban opposition movement signed a peace deal on February 29, which paved the way to intra-Afghan negotiations to start in Qatar earlier this month. There is no timeline on the discussions, which are the first direct talks between the two warring sides.

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Ford Canada, Union Strike Deal Securing \$1.5Bln in Investment for Electric Car Lines

TORONTO, September 22 (Sputnik) - Ford Canada and the union representing its unionized employees have struck a deal securing nearly \$1.5 billion in investments for new electric vehicle lines, Unifor National President Jerry Dias said in a statement on Tuesday.

"I am pleased to announce investments as part of our settlement totaling \$1.95 billion dollars [\$1.47 billion USD] to build electric vehicles in Canada, primarily in our workplaces in Oakville and Windsor," Dias said via Twitter.

The three-year national labor contract will see plants in the cities of Oakville and Windsor retool their lines to begin electric vehicle production after the production of Ford and Lincoln SUVs ends at the plant in 2023.

There are, however, reports that the federal government has approached Ford Canada with a proposal to provide up to \$1.13 billion in support for electric vehicle manufacturing in Canada. According to the reports, the proposal is a part of a \$1.5-billion government strategy to bring electric vehicle manufacturing to the province of Ontario.

It is unclear if Ford Canada reached any agreement with the Canadian government prior to striking a deal with Unifor. Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Unifor had targeted Ford for job action, citing the lack of investment in electric vehicle production in Canada.

"I selected Ford because we think the company is prepared to reward our members, make a commitment to continue manufacturing in Canada, and has a vision that we think is in the best interest of the industry and the economy," Dias had said. "Worldwide we have seen more than

\$300 billion dollars [225.23 billion USD] announced for electric vehicle production and not one dime is destined for Canada. Our members want that to change."

Electric vehicle production at the Oakville and Windsor plants is expected to commence in 2024, with the first vehicles rolling off the line in 2025, according to Dias.

Ford of Canada employs nearly 5,400 unionized workers in Canada.

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Canadian Police Conclude Operation Related to Ricin-Laced Letter Addressed to Trump - RCMP

TORONTO, September 22 (Sputnik) - Canadian authorities in the province of Quebec concluded an operation related to the ricin-laced letters addressed to US President Donald Trump Monday evening, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) spokesperson Cpl. Melanie Cappiello-Stebenne told Sputnik on Tuesday.

On Monday morning, the RCMP's Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, Explosives team (CBRNE) began an operation in the Montreal-area suburb of Longueuil related to the ongoing investigation of the potentially deadly letters.

"The RCMP operation that took place Monday was completed in the evening,"

Cappiello-Stebenne said.

Cappiello-Stebenne added that Canada's federal police agency cannot disclose details of the search as it was part of an ongoing international investigation.

The RCMP continues to cooperate with US authorities, the spokesperson said.

The US Department of Justice is set to reveal more details about the case at a press briefing later on Tuesday.

A suspect in connection with the case, identified as Canadian national Pascale Cecile Veronique Ferrier by media reports, was detained at the Peace Bridge Border Crossing in Buffalo, NY on Sunday.

On Saturday, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said that an investigation was underway over a suspicious letter addressed to US President Donald Trump. The package was reportedly intercepted earlier in the week and two tests were conducted, confirming the presence of the deadly poison ricin.

According to US media reports, the suspect detained on the US-Canada border on Sunday was armed.

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'Prudent Planning' Underway for Full US Withdrawal From Afghanistan by May 2021 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is conducting "prudent planning" to withdraw all its military forces from Afghanistan by May 2021, though no specific orders have

been issued so far, David Helvey, who performs the duties of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, said on Tuesday.

"I would like to make clear that the Secretary [of Defense Mark Esper] has not issued orders to reduce military personnel below these 4,000 to 5,000 level in Afghanistan, although we are conducting prudent planning to withdraw to zero service members by May 2021 if conditions warrant," Helvey told the US House Subcommittee on National Security.

Helvey noted that the current orders are to draw down US troops to 4,000-5,000 from 8,600 by the end of November.

The United States began reducing troops after signing a peace deal with the Taliban opposition movement in Doha, Qatar, on February 29. Intra-Afghan peace negotiations were then launched in Doha earlier this month. The peace negotiations have no predetermined timeframe.

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US, Russia Cooperate on Civil Use of Space Despite Disagreements in Other Areas - General

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – The United States and Russia have a mutually beneficial civil partnership in space despite disagreements in other areas, US Space Force chief Gen. John Raymond said on Tuesday.

"Even with areas where our countries disagree there [has] always been agreement and partnership on civil use of space," Raymond said during the Mitchell Institute virtual conference. Both nations had "great collaboration" in space even at the height of the cold war, he added.

NASA Administrator James Bridenstine, in turn, reminded that US and Russia will celebrate the 20th anniversary of co-working at the International Space Station in November.

"This is a monumental achievement of diplomacy," he said.

The NASA chief urged to remember significant programs, which both countries realized cooperating with each other in the past, including Apollo-Soyuz in 1970s and Shuttle-Mir missions in 1980s-1990s. "It is a channel of communication, it is an important kind of diplomatic tool," he said.

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US Space Force, NASA Sign New Agreement to Expand Collaboration in Space - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the US Space Force on behalf of the Department of Defense have signed a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to improve cooperation on lunar exploration and other programs, NASA said in a statement on Tuesday.

"While advancing plans for unprecedented lunar exploration under the Artemis program, NASA also is building on a longstanding partnership with the Department of Defense with a new memorandum of understanding," the statement said.

The new MOU replaces the previous one between NASA and the US Air Force Space Command of 2006 and commits the two agencies to broad collaboration in the numerous areas including human spaceflight, space transportation, safe operations in space and planetary defense, the statement said.

"This agreement ... reaffirms and continues our rich legacy of collaboration with the Defense Department and provides a critical foundation to investigate areas of mutual interest for our distinct civil and defense roles in space," NASA Administrator James Bridenstine said in the statement.

Bridenstine noted that NASA plans to send a robotic mission to the Moon as early as 2021, subsequent missions in 2022 and 2023, and a human mission in 2024.

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US Senator Romney Backs Holding Vote on Supreme Court Pick Despite Proximity to Election

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Republican Senator Mitt Romney on Tuesday said he would vote on a Supreme Court nominee at anytime, which all but assures President Donald Trump's pick will be confirmed ahead of the November election.

Democrats argue that holding the vote now is hypocritical given that Senate Republicans refused to vote on President Barack Obama's Supreme Court pick in 2016 because it was an election year.

"I intend to follow the Constitution and precedent in considering the President's nominee. If the nominee reaches the Senate floor, I intend to vote based upon their qualifications," Romney said in a statement.

Last Friday, US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died of complications from metastatic pancreatic cancer at her home in Washington. Trump promised to put forward as early as next Saturday a replacement to be chosen from a list of five women.

Before the liberal-leaning judge's death, the high court already was stacked with a 5-4 conservative majority. If Trump's pick is nominated, many liberal Democrats fear the court could outlaw abortion.

Romney stopped short of saying that he would vote in favor of Trump's pick. The senator from Utah simply said he agreed to hold the vote at all. However, many believe Trump's nominee will likely be aligned with Romney's conservative ideological preferences.

The Republicans currently hold a 53-47 majority in the Senate.

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Travelers Need Systematic Testing for COVID-19 Before Flights - IATA

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Airline passengers need to be systematically tested for the novel coronavirus before embarking on any flights, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said in a press release on Tuesday.

"IATA called for the development and deployment of rapid, accurate, affordable, easy-to-operate, scalable and systematic COVID-19 testing for all passengers before departure as an alternative to quarantine measures in order to re-establish global air connectivity," the release said.

IATA will work through the International Civil Aviation Organization and with health authorities to implement the process rapidly, the release continued.

"The key to restoring the freedom of mobility across borders is systematic COVID-19 testing of all travelers before departure. This will give governments the confidence to open their borders without complicated risk models that see constant changes in the rules imposed on travel," IATA Director General and CEO Alexandre de Juniac said.

International travel is 92 percent down on 2019 levels, according to the release.

Numerous critics, however, have pointed out that the existing tests have been largely inaccurate, showing a significant number of false positive results.

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US COVID-19 Death Toll Surpasses 200,000 - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The COVID-19 death toll in the United States has surpassed 200,000, while the number of recorded infections is nearing 7 million, with the country accounting for more than one in every five coronavirus fatalities worldwide, the latest data from Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center showed on Tuesday.

The exact death toll now stands at 200,005, while the number of confirmed cases reached 6,861,211, according to the university's data.

The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on March 11. The US remains the worst-hit nation, both in terms of the number of cases and the death toll.

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US Darknet Global Probe Leads to 170 Opioid Traffickers Arrested - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - An international law enforcement operation targeting opioid traffickers on the Darknet has led to more than 170 arrests worldwide and the seizure of weapons, drugs and over \$6.5 million in various currencies, the US Department of Justice said in a press release on Tuesday.

"This operation resulted in the seizure of over \$6.5 million in both cash and virtual currencies; approximately 500 kilograms of drugs worldwide; 274 kilograms of drugs, including fentanyl, oxycodone, hydrocodone, methamphetamine, heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, MDMA, and medicine containing addictive substances in the United States," the release said.

The Justice Department explained that Darknet vendor accounts were identified and attributed to real individuals selling illicit goods on Darknet market sites such as AlphaBay, Dream, WallStreet, Nightmare, Empire, White House, DeepSea, Dark Market and others.

Operation Disruptor led to 121 arrests in the United States including two in Canada at the request of the United States, 42 in Germany, eight in the Netherlands, four in the United Kingdom, three in Austria and one in Sweden, the release said.

A number of investigations are still ongoing to identify the individuals behind dark web accounts, the release added.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 5 Venezuelan Individuals - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on five Venezuelan individuals, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a notice on Tuesday.

"The following individuals have been added to OFAC's SDN [Specially Designated Nationals] List: BENAVIDES RONDON, Williams Jose, BUCARAN PARAGUAN, Chaim Jose, GUTIERREZ PARRA, Jose Bernabe, LUCES OSORIO, Guillermo Antonio, PONENTE PARRA, Miguel Antonio Jose," the notice said.

The Treasury Department said the five individuals are current or former members of the Venezuelan government who have colluded with President Nicolas Maduro in a scheme to manipulate the parliamentary elections in December 2020 and to undermine any credible opposition challenge to the government.

The government controls the Supreme Court of Justice and has changed the leadership of some of the largest opposition parties in Venezuela and handpicked Maduro supporters to fill in the vacancy, the Treasury Department added.

On Monday, the United States imposed sanctions against Maduro and his government for cooperating with Iran.

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Senate Panel Advances Nomination of Julie Fisher for US Ambassador to Belarus

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday voted to advance the nomination of Julie Fisher for US ambassador to Belarus with several members voicing reservations amid the political crisis in the former Soviet republic. "The motion has passed and those who request to be recorded in the negative will be recorded as such," Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jim Risch said. The panel voted for the list of 15 ambassadorial nominations, including Fisher and Keith Dayton for Ukraine.

In April, President Donald Trump nominated Fisher, a career diplomat, to be the first after a lengthy hiatus US ambassador to Belarus, essentially reestablishing full diplomatic relations between the two countries. Picks require a Senate full-house confirmation.

Risch said he hopes the US having an ambassador in Belarus to coordinate support for the Belorussian people is not seen as a reward for President Alexander Lukashenko, who "needs to be gone." Lukashenko, he added, does not deserve any help of any kind.

Before the vote Senator Chris Murphy asked to be recorded in the negative and said that he intends to oppose Fisher's nomination "if it proceeds to the floor" in the absence of a broader US strategy on Belarus.

Murphy said it is "unwise" to have the United States reestablish full diplomatic relations with a government that is in the middle of a brutal crackdown on protesters in the streets.

Lukashenko won a sixth term in office by a landslide on August 9, although Belarus's opposition has not recognized the results of the election. Several weeks of opposition protests have been held in Belarus's major cities since the vote was held.

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Trump Does Not Mention Russia, Blasts China in UN General Assembly Speech

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump criticized China but made no mention of Russia at all in his speech to the 75th UN General Assembly on Tuesday. During his speech, Trump lashed out at China for not being transparent and allowing the novel coronavirus to spread throughout the world, and called on the United Nations to hold Beijing accountable for its actions.

Trump also urged the United Nations to focus on what he called are "real problems" facing the world such as terrorism, ethnic cleansing of minority religious groups, trafficking and others. The US president hailed the recently brokered peace agreements with Israel and announced that more such deals will be reached shortly.

Trump's speech was pre-recorded and lasted about 7 minutes.

This year, the annual UN General Assembly high-level gathering is held online because of restrictive measures imposed with respect to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

The world leaders submitted pre-recorded messages that are being presented by their countries' delegates who are in New York.

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Trump Says UN Must Focus on 'Real Problems' Including Terrorism, Ethnic Cleansing

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said in his speech to the UN General Assembly on Tuesday that the world body must focus on addressing global issues like terrorism, ethnic cleansing of minority religious groups, trafficking and other problems. "If the United Nations is to be an effective organization it must focus on the real problems of the world," Trump said during remarks at the White House. "This includes terrorism, the oppression of women, forced labor, drug trafficking, human and sex trafficking, religious persecution, and the ethnic cleansing of religious minorities."

Trump also used his UN General Assembly address to call attention to China. The US president called on the United Nations to hold China accountable for failing to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus in the international community.

Trump also said the international community should be prioritizing their national interests rather than focusing on pursuing global ambitions.

Moreover, Trump said the United States now has weapons that it has never thought it would have them.

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Brazil Committed to Completing Trade Agreements Signed Between Mercosur, EU - Bolsonaro

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Brazil is committed to completing the trade deals signed between Mercosur and the European Union, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro said during his speech to the 75th UN General Assembly on Tuesday.

"We remain committed to completing the trade agreements signed between Mercosur and the European Union, as well as the European Free Trade Association," Bolsonaro said. "These agreements contain important provisions that reinforce our commitment to environmental protection."

Bolsonaro emphasized that his administration had put behind protectionism and has adopted trade liberalization.

"I reaffirm our commitment for the proposed reform of the World Trade Organization which must provide us with the relevant disciplines in line with new international realities," he added.

Last June, the European Union and Mercosur agreed on the terms of the trade deal that they negotiated over for almost 20 years. The accord is said to have been designed to enhance political and economic cooperation and boost sustainable growth. Once ratified by all individual member states and in force, the deal will eliminate the majority of tariffs between the two blocs by establishing a free trade area.

However, some EU member states have said they are hesitant about the deal's ratification over what they consider Brazil's inaction on the destruction of the Amazon rainforest and its non-compliance with the Paris Climate Agreement.

Mercosur was established in 1991 to encompass Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay into a common market. Venezuela's full membership was suspended in December 2016.

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Trump Says in UNGA Speech US Intends to Deliver More Peace Deals With Israel 'Shortly'

(Updates with additional information in para 4; background info in paras 3, 5-7)

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said during his speech to the 75th UN General Assembly on Tuesday that the United States plans to announce more peace accords with Israel soon after the Jewish state inked agreements with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

"We intend to deliver more peace agreements shortly and I have never been more optimistic for the future of the region," Trump said. "There is no blood in the sand, those days are hopefully over."

On September 15, the UAE and Bahrain officially reconciled with Israel by signing US-brokered peace deals at a ceremony in the White House.

"These groundbreaking peace deals are the dawn of the new Middle East," Trump said. "By taking a different approach we have achieved different outcomes, far superior outcomes. We took the approach, and the approach worked."

The agreement signed with the UAE is a peace treaty for establishing diplomatic ties and full normalization of relations with Israel, while the agreement with Bahrain is a declaration of peace.

The accords will see the countries exchange embassies with Israel, allow direct flights, and boost commercial cooperation. The UAE became the third and Bahrain the fourth Arab state to normalize relations with Israel after Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994.

Trump has said that at least five or six more countries are at advanced stages of negotiations with Israel and may soon follow suit.

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Trump Says UN Must Focus on 'Real Problems' Including Terrorism, Ethnic Cleansing

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"If the United Nations is to be an effective organization it must focus on the real problems of the world," Trump said during remarks at the White House. "This includes terrorism, the oppression of women, forced labor, drug trafficking, human and sex trafficking, religious persecution, and the ethnic cleansing of religious minorities."

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Trump in Speech to UNGA Calls on UN to Hold China Accountable for COVID-19 - Excerpts

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump in his speech to the UN General Assembly will call on the world body organization to hold China accountable for its actions on the coronavirus pandemic, according to excerpts released by the White House on Tuesday.

"In the earliest days of the virus, China locked down travel domestically while allowing flights to leave China and infect the world ... The United Nations must hold China accountable for their actions," Trump will say in his UNGA speech later this morning.

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Guterres At UNGA Says Global Community Must Do All it Can to Avoid New Cold War

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in his opening remarks to the UN General Assembly on Tuesday warned that the international community must do everything possible to avert a new Cold War.

"The world needs a global ceasefire to stop all 'hot' conflicts," Guterres said. "At the same time, we must do everything to avoid a new Cold War."

Referring to the trade battle between the United States and China, Guterres said the world could not allow a future with the two largest economies split the globe in a "Great Fracture," each with its own financial rules and technological capabilities.

"A technological and economic divide risks inevitably turning into a geo-strategic and military divide. We must avoid this at all costs," Guterres added.

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UN Chief Calls for Cooperation to Achieve Libya Ceasefire, Political Talks

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - The international community should work together to bring about an effective ceasefire agreement in Libya and resume intra-Libyan political

discussions, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Tuesday in his remarks at the General Debate of the UN General Assembly.

"In Libya, fighting has subsided but the massive buildup of mercenaries and weapons — in flagrant violation of violating Security Council resolutions — shows that the risk of renewed confrontation remains high," Guterres said. "We must all work together for an effective ceasefire agreement and the resumption of intra-Libyan political talks."

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UN Chief At General Assembly Urges Israel, Palestine to Re-Engage in Meaningful Talks

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in his speech to the UN General Assembly urged Israeli and Palestinian leaders to re-engage in meaningful negotiations aimed at reaching a two-state solution to resolve the decades-long conflict.

"In the Middle East - with a period of calm in Gaza and annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank put aside at least for the time being - I urge Israeli and Palestinian leaders to re-engage in meaningful negotiations that will realize a two state-solution in line with relevant UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements," Guterres said on Tuesday.

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Guterres in UNGA Speech Urges Halt to All Ongoing Armed Conflicts Until End of 2020

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in his remarks to the UN General Assembly on Tuesday renewed his call for a global ceasefire to be achieved before the end of 2020 amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

"As the pandemic took hold, I called for a global ceasefire," Guterres said. "Today, I appeal for a new push by the international community to make this a reality by the end of this year. We have exactly 100 days."

In March, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Guterres urged the international community to put all armed conflicts on pause in order to concentrate efforts on battling the virus. The original appeal was endorsed by 180 member states, Guterres said.

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RPT: REVIEW - US Unveils Sanctions Targeting Iranian Scientists, Violators of Arms Embargo

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump signed an order greenlighting severe economic penalties on foreign nations, corporations and individuals that violate the UN arms embargo on Tehran, while the Treasury Department sanctioned Iranians tied to the country's nuclear program.

TARGETING IRAN ARMS TRADE

The United States revealed that it would enforce the reinstatement of international anti-Iranian sanctions, despite no backing for it at the United Nations Security Council. It also announced more than two dozen fresh designations over Iran's nuclear and ballistic projects as well as its conventional weapons trade.

"The Executive Order I am issuing today blocks the property, and interests in property, in the United States of those who contribute to the supply, sale, or transfer of conventional arms to or from Iran, as well as those who provide technical training, financial support and services, and other assistance related to these arms," US President Donald Trump said in a statement on Monday. "This Executive Order is critical to enforcing the UN arms embargo on Iran."

US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said Trump's order prevents the export of conventional arms to "rogue regimes" by Iran and bans the export of weapons by arms-producing nations to Tehran "where Iran will in turn provide them to terrorists and to rogue regimes."

The international conventional arms embargo is set to expire next month after the UNSC rejected a US proposal to prolong it. Now the US considers it in place indefinitely after it initiated the snapback sanctions mechanism of the Iranian nuclear agreement. Other key council members, including Russia and European nations, rejected the move, claiming that the Americans lost legal rights for it after they left the deal with Iran.

"I always knew that an elephant is a symbol of the [Trump's] Republican Party but please do not consider the world as a china store," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, reacting to the US unilateral moves in an interview to Al Arabiya broadcaster.

NEW DESIGNATIONS

The Trump administration also announced on Monday new sanctions and export control measures on 27 entities and individuals connected to "Iran's proliferation networks," among them nuclear scientists, a logistic branch of the Iranian military and Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro.

"Our actions include... designation by the Department of State of Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL), Iran's Defense Industries Organization (DIO) and its Director, Mehrdad Akhlaghi-Ketabchi, as well as Nicolas Maduro, the illegitimate dictator of Venezuela, for conventional arms-related activities pursuant to the new Iran Conventional Arms Executive Order," the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement.

Over Iran's nuclear project Departments of State and Treasury designated six individuals and three entities associated with the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, including two "who were re-listed by the UN sanctions that returned on September 19, 2020." Another five individuals affiliated with the AEOI will be subject to the Commerce Department's export control restrictions. Three individuals and four entities with ties to Iran's liquid propellant ballistic missile organization, the Shahid Hemmat Industrial Group, were designated in connection with alleged missile proliferation activities.

Pompeo warned that sanctions will stay and get tougher until Iran changes its behavior and embarks on negotiations to resolve all issues of concern.

"We will continue and expand our sanctions until Iran is willing to conclude a comprehensive negotiation that addresses the regime's malign behavior. We are always open to diplomacy with Iran, but Iran must respond with diplomacy, not with more violence, bloodshed, and nuclear extortion. Until then, maximum pressure will continue," he said.

O'Brien confirmed that the US seeks a "grand deal" with the country. Pentagon chief Mark Esper said that in the meantime American forces stand ready to respond to any "future Iran's aggression" and defend its allies.

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RPT: PREVIEW - UN General Debate Impacted by COVID-19 Kicks Off Virtually in New York

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - The General Debate of the UN General Assembly will start on Tuesday, and for the first time in its history, will be held in a virtual format due the impact the coronavirus pandemic has had on global travel and in-person diplomacy.

Held on September 22-29, the annual high-level event will not see a large number of officials gathering in New York City. Usually, the General Assembly week would see 70 to 90 world leaders come to the UN headquarters.

The upcoming General Debate session will be genuinely unique: it will celebrate 75 years since the establishment of the United Nations and witness a record number of high-level officials reflecting in an online format on the issues of global importance. This year's event will allow the participation of the leaders that were, in previous years, unable to come to the UN host country - the United States - due to visa restrictions.

According to the United Nations, 119 heads of state and 54 heads of governments will deliver their remarks via pre-recorded videos submitted by a country's delegate already in New York. The theme of the high-level debate will be "The Future we want, the United Nations we need: reaffirming our collective commitment to multilateralism – confronting COVID-19 through effective multilateral action."

Russian President Vladimir Putin's video address has already been sent to the United Nations. It will be presented on the first date of the General Debate and will be the seventh to play.

The Russian president planned to participate in the UN General Assembly's anniversary session in-person; however, due to the COVID-19-related travel restrictions, his and other leaders' visits had been canceled.

Initially, several high-level officials, including Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had indicated they would come to New York, according to the President of the General Assembly, Volkan Bozkir. The plans were disrupted by New York State requiring mandatory quarantine for 14 days for every visitor coming from abroad, Bozkir explained.

According to a provisional list of the General Debate speakers, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro, whose country traditionally speaks first at the event since 1947, will open the debate.

US President Donald Trump is set to deliver his message, following the Brazilian leader. Trump's in-person participation has been one of the most common questions to be raised at UN noon briefings.

It was expected that Trump would be the only official coming to the UN headquarters in Manhattan, yet, on Thursday, the White House said he would instead send a pre-recorded video address to the world's body.

Erdogan's video message will be played after Trump, followed by the speech by China's President Xi Jinping and the leaders of Chile, Cuba, Jordan, South Korea, Qatar, the Philippines and Morocco.

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani will also speak at the General Assembly on Tuesday, along with the leaders of France, South Africa, Egypt, Tajikistan, Mexico, Latvia, Lithuania, Indonesia and Peru.

The second day of the General Debate will open with the participation of the President of Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Mozambique, Iraq, Finland, Moldova, Lebanon, Kenya, Bolivia, Afghanistan and Venezuela, among others. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's video message is scheduled to be played on Wednesday as well.

Thursday will begin with the remarks by the President of Niger, Albania and Cyprus. Yemen's President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi will also speak on this day, along with the leaders of Libya, Azerbaijan, Haiti, Zimbabwe, Haiti, Somalia and the Central African Republic.

The European Union, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Armenia, Pakistan, Canada, Japan, Georgia and Portugal will participate in the General Debate on Friday.

On September 26, the UN General Assembly hall will see the Indian leader's participation, followed by the speeches by UK's Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Syria's Deputy Prime Minister and Belarus' Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei.

Virtual addresses by North Korea, Israel, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and the United Arab Emirates are planned to be presented on the General Debate's final day - September 29.

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RPT - US Insists on Enhancing Verification Under New START Despite Russian Concerns

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States seeks to have Russia commit to a framework that would enhance verification in the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

Earlier on Monday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Russia considers it inconceivable to strengthen control and verification measures in the New START, as proposed by US special envoy Marshall Billingslea, adding that there is no reason to change anything and there will be no return to the practice of the late 1990s.

"Russia should commit to a framework that would lead to a new agreement on all nuclear warheads, improve verification under the current treaty on strategic systems, and set the stage for a comprehensive, verifiable treaty on the nuclear arsenals of the United States, Russia, and

China," a spokesperson said after being asked if the United States would consider presenting a new proposal on arms control to Moscow after it highlighted concerns with the original.

In an interview with Russia's Kommersant newspaper, Billingslea said that unless Washington and Moscow struck a presidential memorandum on arms control by February, the treaty would not be extended.

Billingslea also warned that the "price" for Russia would rise after November if President Donald Trump is reelected. In response, Ryabkov said that an agreement is possible only if the United States abandons ultimatums.

New START, the last major arms control deal between the US and Russia, expires on February 5, 2021.

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US Economic Indicators Show 'Marked Improvement' Since COVID-19 Outbreak - Powell

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Many US economic indicators have improved markedly since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic in March, but more work is needed to lift the economy and the Federal Reserve is determined to do whatever it takes to support the recovery, Chairman Jay Powell said in a speech prepared for delivery to Congress. "Economic activity has picked up from its depressed second-quarter level, when much of the economy was shut down to stem the spread of the virus. Many economic indicators show marked improvement," Powell said in his remarks to be delivered at the three-day House hearing for the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act beginning Tuesday. Powell said household spending appears to have recovered about three-fourths of its earlier decline, likely owing in part to federal stimulus payments and expanded unemployment benefits, while the housing sector has rebounded. Fixed investment for business has also shown signs of improvement and the labor market regained roughly half of the 22 million payroll jobs lost in March and April, Powell said. However, employment and overall economic activity remain well below their pre-pandemic levels and the path ahead continued to be highly uncertain, Powell said. "The downturn has not fallen equally on all Americans; those least able to bear the burden have been the most affected," he said. "This reversal of economic fortune has upended many lives and created great uncertainty about the future." The Federal Reserve remains committed to using its tools to do what it can for as long as it takes to ensure that the recovery will be as strong as possible as well as to limit lasting damage to the economy, Powell said.

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US Arms Control Envoy Discusses Russia, China With NATO Officials - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea said in a statement that he had arms control discussions with NATO officials regarding Russia and China. "Today had a fulsome 3 hour discussion with officials from across the NATO Alliance regarding Russia, China, and a range of options for future verification and transparency mechanisms," Billingslea said in the statement on Monday. Billingslea told Russian newspaper Kommersant that the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which is the only remaining Russia-US arms control deal in force, will not be extended if Washington and Moscow fail to conclude a relevant presidential memorandum by February. Billingslea also said that if Russia opposes the memorandum, the United States will keep modernizing its nuclear arsenal without limitations imposed by the New START.

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Louisville Police Declares State of Emergency Ahead of Breonna Taylor Verdict - Memorandum

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - A state of emergency has been declared in Louisville, Kentucky, ahead of the state Attorney General's announcement expected this week in Breonna Taylor's case, Louisville Metro Police Department Chief Robert Schroeder said in a memorandum to police officers.

"In anticipation of Attorney General Cameron's announcement in the Breonna Taylor case, I am declaring a state of emergency for the Louisville Metro Police Department," Schroeder said in the memorandum on Monday.

Schroeder explained that the city's police department will immediately begin operating under emergency staffing levels and guidelines to prepare for any civil unrest that may unfold.

Media reported that the US district courthouse and a US Citizenship and Immigration Services field office in Louisville have been closed this week in anticipation of the state Attorney General's announcement in the findings of his office's probe into Taylor's death and a grand jury's decision on possible indictments for the three police officers who were allegedly involved.

Taylor was killed in her Louisville home in March when police officers executed a no-knock drug search warrant late at night. Taylor's boyfriend fired a first shot in self-defense fearing the entrants were burglars, which prompted the four police officers to unleash a hail of bullets on the house, hitting Taylor eight times.

The killing of the 26-year-old African American medical technician was initially overshadowed by the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic that began to sweep the country around the same time. Activists, celebrities and demonstrators have since made it a point to keep her name in the news cycle and call for justice over her death. The officers have yet to face any legal repercussions over the killing.

Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer announced last week that the city will pay \$12 million to Taylor's family as part of a settlement for her death.

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UPDATE 2 - Trump Says Pick for US Supreme Court Possible by Saturday Out of 5 Women Candidates

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said he may choose his nominee for the US Supreme Court by the end of the week and is considering picking from a list of five women candidates to replace the deceased justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the bench.

"I would say on Friday or Saturday I will be announcing the pick. Five women are being looked at and vetted very carefully," Trump told reporters on Monday.

Trump reiterated that he wants to see a vote on his US Supreme Court nominee at the Senate before the November 3 presidential election.

"I'd much rather have a vote before the election... and we have plenty of time to do that," he said.

The US president added that has already spoken to some of the candidates and plans to hold more meetings soon.

On Friday, US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died of complications from metastatic pancreatic cancer at her home in Washington.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Friday that the Senate would vote on Trump's pick to replace Ginsburg regardless of criticism by Democrats that they should not do so because of being in an election year. The Republicans currently hold a 53-47 majority in the Senate.

Later on Monday, FOX News reported citing unnamed sources that Trump met with Judge Amy Coney Barrett, a potential frontrunner to fill the vacant Supreme Court seat.

Barrett, 48, is a conservative, pro-life Catholic who is a circuit judge on the US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in Chicago.

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US Sentences UK National to 5 Years in Prison for Role in Hacking Group - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has sentenced a United Kingdom national for his role in a hacking group that stole personal identifying information from companies and extorted them for ransoms.

"US District Judge Ronnie White for the Eastern District of Missouri sentenced Nathan Wyatt, 39, who participated in a computer hacking collective known as 'The Dark Overlord,' which targeted victims in the St. Louis area beginning in 2016. Wyatt was extradited from the United Kingdom to the Eastern District of Missouri in December 2019," the release said on Monday. Judge White also ordered Wyatt to pay more than \$1.4 million in restitution, the release said. In 2016, Wyatt participated in the hacking group's effort to steal information from US healthcare providers, accounting firms and other businesses. The group threatened to release the stolen data unless the companies paid a ransom between \$75,000 to \$350,000 in bitcoin, the release said.

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US Building Coalition Against Nord Stream 2 Gas Pipeline- Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is building a coalition against the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in an interview.

"We hope that the Nord Stream 2 pipeline won't be completed. We're working to make sure we build out a coalition that prevents that from happening," Pompeo told Bild on Monday.

The United States has opposed the natural gas pipeline since its inception, arguing that it would lead to a European overdependence on Russian gas and thus pose a risk to European security.

The US campaign against Nord Stream 2 intensified after the alleged poisoning of Russian opposition blogger Alexei Navalny, prompting US officials to threaten sanctions against the pipeline and affiliated parties.

Pompeo expressed a desire to see the German government adopt the US position on Nord Stream 2 either because of Navalny or the "real security implications" of dependence on Russian gas.

However, Pompeo declined to give an opinion on whether Nord Stream 2 would eventually be launched.

In an interview with Sputnik, German lawmakers said the United States may be exploiting Navalny's alleged poisoning to pressure Germany into halting the Nord Stream 2 project.

A number of politicians in Germany and the European Union have recently voiced calls to suspend or even end the Nord Stream 2 project because of the alleged poisoning.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that the issues of Nord Stream 2 and the incident with Navalny should be considered separately.

The Nord Stream 2 project consists of a 745-mile-long twin pipeline that will carry up to 55 billion cubic meters (1.942 trillion cubic feet) of gas per year from Russia to Germany, passing through the territorial waters or exclusive economic zones of Denmark, Finland, Germany, Russia and Sweden.

The pipeline is said would provide a major cost benefit to the German energy market with natural gas being delivered directly without any intermediaries.

Concurrently, the US liquefied natural gas (LNG) industry is also increasingly setting its eyes on the European market. According to the European Commission, US LNG exports into Europe have increased by 760 percent since a 2018 meeting between US President Donald Trump and former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker.

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US Judge Extends Deadline to Receive Mail Ballots in Wisconsin to November 9 - Filing

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has extended the deadline to receive mail-in ballots for the November 3 US presidential and general elections in the state of Wisconsin to November 9 as long as the ballot is post marked on or before Election Day, a court document revealed.

"Defendants the Commissioners of the Wisconsin Election Commission and its Administrator are: Enjoined from enforcing the deadline for receipt of absentee ballots under Wisconsin Statute § 6.87(6), and the deadline is extended until November 9, 2020, for all ballots mailed and postmarked on or before election day, November 3, 2020," US Judge William Conley said in the court document on Monday.

Conley also extended the deadline for online and mail-in registration from October 14 to October 21.

Mail-in ballots in Wisconsin are usually due by 8:00 p.m. local time on Election Day.

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Trump Says Will Talk About Alleged Poisoning of Navalny 'At Another Time'

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump told reporters that he would not discuss the alleged poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny, but will talk about it at another time.

"We'll talk about that at another time," Trump said on Monday when asked who he thought poisoned Navalny in Russia.

On August 20, Navalny fell ill during a domestic flight within Russia. He was initially treated in a hospital in the Siberian city of Omsk, where the airplane made an emergency landing. Two days later, Navalny was transferred to the Charite hospital in Berlin for further treatment once the Russian doctors established he was fit for cross-border transportation by air.

The German government said doctors claimed they had proof Navalny was poisoned with a nerve agent from the Novichok group of toxins. According to Berlin, the conclusions of its doctors were confirmed by laboratories in France and Sweden.

Tests in Russia did not show traces of poison in Navalny's organism. Moscow has demanded that Germany provide evidence to back up its claims, but has not received any.

Trump said he had no reason to doubt Germany's results. However, Trump said in early September during a press briefing that the United States has no proof Navalny was poisoned.

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US Federal Debt to Equal GDP by End of 2020 - Congressional Budget Office

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US federal debt is growing so fast under the Trump administration that it is now projected to be as large as the country's annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by the end of this year, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) announced in a report.

"By the end of 2020, federal debt held by the public is projected to equal 98 percent of Gross Domestic Product - its highest level since shortly after World War II," the report said on Monday. The CBO pointed out that if current laws governing taxes and spending generally remained unchanged, the federal debt is projected for the first time to be 100 percent of GDP in 2021 and reach its highest level in the nation's history of 107 percent of GDP by 2023.

"Debt would continue to increase in most years thereafter, reaching 195 percent of GDP by 2050," the report said.

The CBO also said that deficits in coming decades are projected to be large by historical standards. Deficits would increase from 5 percent of GDP in 2030 to 13 percent by 2050 - a percentage that would be larger every year than the average deficit of three percent of GDP over the past half century, the CBO added.

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PREVIEW - UN General Debate Impacted by COVID-19 Kicks Off Virtually in New York

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - The General Debate of the UN General Assembly will start on Tuesday, and for the first time in its history, will be held in a virtual format due the impact the coronavirus pandemic has had on global travel and in-person diplomacy.

Held on September 22-29, the annual high-level event will not see a large number of officials gathering in New York City. Usually, the General Assembly week would see 70 to 90 world leaders come to the UN headquarters.

The upcoming General Debate session will be genuinely unique: it will celebrate 75 years since the establishment of the United Nations and witness a record number of high-level officials reflecting in an online format on the issues of global importance. This year's event will allow the participation of the leaders that were, in previous years, unable to come to the UN host country - the United States - due to visa restrictions.

According to the United Nations, 119 heads of state and 54 heads of governments will deliver their remarks via pre-recorded videos submitted by a country's delegate already in New York. The theme of the high-level debate will be "The Future we want, the United Nations we need: reaffirming our collective commitment to multilateralism – confronting COVID-19 through effective multilateral action."

Russian President Vladimir Putin's video address has already been sent to the United Nations. It will be presented on the first date of the General Debate and will be the seventh to play.

The Russian president planned to participate in the UN General Assembly's anniversary session in-person; however, due to the COVID-19-related travel restrictions, his and other leaders' visits had been canceled.

Initially, several high-level officials, including Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had indicated they would come to New York, according to the President of the General Assembly, Volkan Bozkir. The plans were disrupted by New York State requiring mandatory quarantine for 14 days for every visitor coming from abroad, Bozkir explained.

According to a provisional list of the General Debate speakers, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro, whose country traditionally speaks first at the event since 1947, will open the debate. US President Donald Trump is set to deliver his message, following the Brazilian leader. Trump's in-person participation has been one of the most common questions to be raised at UN noon briefings.

It was expected that Trump would be the only official coming to the UN headquarters in Manhattan, yet, on Thursday, the White House said he would instead send a pre-recorded video address to the world's body.

Erdogan's video message will be played after Trump, followed by the speech by China's President Xi Jinping and the leaders of Chile, Cuba, Jordan, South Korea, Qatar, the Philippines and Morocco.

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani will also speak at the General Assembly on Tuesday, along with the leaders of France, South Africa, Egypt, Tajikistan, Mexico, Latvia, Lithuania, Indonesia and Peru.

The second day of the General Debate will open with the participation of the President of Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Mozambique, Iraq, Finland, Moldova, Lebanon, Kenya, Bolivia, Afghanistan and Venezuela, among others. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's video message is scheduled to be played on Wednesday as well.

Thursday will begin with the remarks by the President of Niger, Albania and Cyprus. Yemen's President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi will also speak on this day, along with the leaders of Libya, Azerbaijan, Haiti, Zimbabwe, Haiti, Somalia and the Central African Republic.

The European Union, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Armenia, Pakistan, Canada, Japan, Georgia and Portugal will participate in the General Debate on Friday.

On September 26, the UN General Assembly hall will see the Indian leader's participation, followed by the speeches by UK's Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Syria's Deputy Prime Minister and Belarus' Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei.

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US Economic Indicators Show 'Marked Improvement' Since COVID-19 Outbreak - Powell

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Trump Says Pick for US Supreme Court Possible By Saturday Out of 5 Women Candidates

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said he may choose his nominee for the US Supreme Court by the end of the week and is considering picking from a list of five women candidates to replace the deceased justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the bench.

"I would say on Friday or Saturday I will be announcing the pick. Five women are being looked at and vetted very carefully," Trump told reporters on Monday.

Trump reiterated that he wants to see a vote on his US Supreme Court nominee at the Senate before the November 3 presidential election.

"I'd much rather have a vote before the election... and we have plenty of time to do that," he said.

The US president added that has already spoken to some of the candidates and plans to hold more meetings soon.

On Friday, US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died of complications from metastatic pancreatic cancer at her home in Washington.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Friday that the Senate would vote on Trump's pick to replace Ginsburg regardless of criticism by Democrats that they should not do so because of being in an election year. The Republicans currently hold a 53-47 majority in the Senate.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik)

NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN

* The United States has imposed sanctions on Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics as well as on the country's Defense Industries Organization, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Monday.

* Pompeo announced sanctions against two individuals who he said are central to Iran's uranium enrichment program.

* The US government has sanctioned five Iranian scientists for their role in Tehran's nuclear development program, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross said.

* The United States is imposing new sanctions and other penalties on 27 entities and individuals connected to Iran's nuclear weapons program, US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien announced.

* US President Donald Trump signed an executive order to severely sanction nations, companies and individuals for selling or supplying Iran with weapons, O'Brien said.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told Al Arabiya broadcaster he would not be surprised if the United States began threatening other countries with sanctions over dealing with Iran.

SITUATION IN LIBYA

* Libyans must decide what their legitimate government looks like first, and this authority can then decide whether all foreign forces should leave the country, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told Al Arabiya broadcaster on Monday.

* The rival powers in Libya are discussing ways to divide oil export revenue after reaching an agreement to lift embargo on oil sales, Lavrov said.

ELECTIONS IN ITALY

* The YES side is expected to win in the Italian constitutional referendum on the reduction in the number of parliamentarians with over 60 percent, first exit polls showed on Monday.

* The center-right coalition has failed to win in Tuscany, the Italian region with the most-watched race in these regional elections, according to the first exit polls.

* A far-right candidate is projected to win in Marche, the traditionally left-leaning region, in the Italian local elections, with over-10-percent lead, according to the first exit polls.

BELARUS DEVELOPMENTS

Belarus and Russia are ready to respond to any threats, have provided and will ensure military security, Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin said on Monday, commenting on the course of the joint exercises Slavic Brotherhood-2020.

* Belarusian Energy Minister Viktor Karankevich invited IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi to the launch of the first power unit of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant on November 7 this year, the Energy Ministry said.

* The European Union has no plans to withdraw its diplomatic mission head in Belarus, despite the bloc not recognizing the results of the August 9 presidential election in the country, the EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

* EU foreign Affairs Council failed to agree on Belarus sanctions list, it will now be discussed by the EU leaders at their next summit, Borrell said.

NAVALNY CASE

* The Russian police have questioned around 200 people in connection with the incident with opposition figure Alexey Navalny, and checks continue, with staffers of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) being subject to re-examination, the Russian Interior Ministry's transport department said on Monday.

* German authorities are handling Russia's second request for legal assistance on the incident with Navalny, the Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, Maria Adebahr, said.

* The European Union's foreign ministers insist on an international investigation into the situation with Navalny, with the involvement of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the bloc's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, said.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

* There will be no need to impose any new coronavirus-related restrictions in Russia in the near future, Anna Popova, the head of the national public health watchdog Rospotrebnadzor, said on Monday.

* Uzbekistan has expressed interest in joint post-registration trials of the COVID-19 vaccine that is being developed by Russia's research center Vector, the Russian public health watchdog, Rospotrebnadzor said.