

**Wires 09/25/20**

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**PREVIEW - Trump to Announce Supreme Court Pick to Cement Conservative Majority Before Election**

WASHINGTON, September 26 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump is set to announce his nominee to fill a recently-vacated Supreme Court seat, a move that is widely expected to cement the bench's like-minded conservative majority ahead of the November 3 election, and for decades to come.

A successor to the late justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who is eulogized as a liberal icon, is being chosen from an undisclosed list of five women and upon an announcement will be submitted for confirmation to the Senate controlled by Trump's own Republican party and already mobilized for a speedy vote.

Trump has made no secret of his desire to have a sympathetic edge at the Supreme Court before November 3 as it may have a final say in determining the outcome of a highly competitive 2020 US Presidential election. The incumbent has repeatedly accused the Democratic opposition of plotting a scam by using mail-in ballots to tilt the vote count in their favor.

The 87-year-old Ginsburg, one of the nine judges on the Supreme Court, died on September 18 of complications from metastatic pancreatic cancer. Before her passing, the court was already stacked with a 5-4 conservative majority, but some justices like John Roberts have often ruled in agreement with the liberal justices.

The move by Trump and his Republicans to rush and fill her seat six weeks before the election is being hotly contested by Democrats. They argue that President Barack Obama was prevented from doing the same when another Supreme Court judge, Antonin Scalia, died in 2016 before that year's presidential election.

Trump, who won that race, now faces Obama's former vice president Joe Biden, a Democrat who is leading in the polls - both nationally and in key swing states - for the upcoming election. Apart from electoral considerations, a lifetime appointment means that the US Supreme Court will be dominated by the conservatives for decades, whose Weltanschauung may impact justices' rulings on most fundamental and divisive issues.

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**Dow Jones, S&P Down Forth Week in Row Despite Rebound in US Stocks**

NEW YORK, September 25 (Sputnik) - US stocks rebounded on Friday but that did not stop the bellwether S&P500 and Dow Jones Industrial Average indices from posting a fourth straight week of losses that represents the market's worst bearish streak in at least a year.

The S&P, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, rose 54 points, or 1.7 percent, to finish the day at 3,300. For the week, the index lost 0.6 percent and a cumulative 6 percent over the last four weeks. The last time the index fell four weeks in a row was in August 2019.

The Dow, the New York Stock Exchange's broadest stocks indicator, rose 358 points, or 1.3 percent, on the day to close at 27,174. For the week, the Dow dropped 1.8 percent and for the four-week stretch, it lost 5 percent. The Dow's previous four-week decline was in May 2019.

The technology-laced Nasdaq Composite Index, which lists industry giants such as Facebook, Apple, Apple, Netflix and Google, was the outlier of the day. It closed Friday's trade up 241 points, or 2.3 percent, and the week up 1.1 percent.

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Pompeo, Japan National Security Chief Reaffirm Countries' Alliance - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Japanese National Security Secretariat chief Shigeru Kitamura reaffirmed their nations' alliance to maintain peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region, Department of State spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a readout on Friday.

"Pompeo met with the Japanese National Security Secretariat Secretary General Shigeru Kitamura in Washington, DC," Ortagus said. "[They] reaffirmed that the US-Japan alliance is the cornerstone of peace, security, and prosperity in a free and open Indo-Pacific."

Pompeo also congratulated Kitamura on his re-appointment to his post following Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's election on September 16.

Pompeo and Kitamura reaffirmed that the US-Japan Alliance is the cornerstone of peace, security and prosperity in a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Suga, who previously served as Chief Cabinet Secretary under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, is expected to continue Abe's strongly pro-US policies.

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New US Visa Restrictions to Affect Students, Education Establishment - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The new US visa regulations proposed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will affect foreign students in the United States as well as the country's education establishment, National Capital Legal Services founder Elizabeth Krukova told Sputnik.

On September 24, DHS announced an initiative to limit visas for foreign students in the United States to two and four years. The initiative also calls for restricting the duration of visas issued to foreign journalists to 240 days with an opportunity to obtain an extension of up to 240 days. Krukova said the DHS regulation is a very effective tool to force graduates to leave the United States.

"The global effect of this is: educated graduates would be very limited in opportunities to legalize, stay or become employable," Krukova said.

Meanwhile, the education establishment would lose significant revenue from international students, which would add to the financial losses that US colleges and universities are already suffering because of previous changes in visa regulations, Krukova also said.

"All affected individuals would have to think way ahead if planning to extend their stay in the United States because many categories of stay require applying many months, if not years ahead," she said. "As a practical matter, a student who is to graduate in May 2022 and intends to find an employer to apply for an H-1B work visa, would have to secure a job offer in January of 2022, start the process of H-1B visa preparation and apply on April 1, 2020."

Krukova said foreign journalists, who will be limited to stay in the United States 240 days, will be able to apply for an extension up until the last moment.

"Their pending application would allow them to remain in the United States," she said.

At present, foreign journalists can stay in the United States as long as they continue to perform their duties in compliance with the terms of admission.

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#### IMF Approves Columbia's Request to Raise Credit Line by \$6.2Bln - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved Colombia's request to raise its credit line by \$6.2 billion, the IMF said in a statement on Friday. "The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved today a request by the Colombian authorities to increase access under its current Flexible Credit Line (FCL) arrangement to SDR 12.267 billion (about USD 17.2 billion), equivalent to 600 percent of quota," the statement read. "This represents an SDR 4.4174 billion increase (about USD 6.2 billion) in relation to the two-year arrangement that was approved on May 1, 2020."

The augmentation was approved in light of Colombia's continued qualification with very strong institutional policy frameworks, track record of economic performance and policy implementation, it added.

The IMF also took into account larger than previously expected impact from COVID-19 pandemic.

Colombia has implemented very strong policy frameworks, which allows it to get a coordinated and timely response to the novel coronavirus pandemic, Fund's Deputy Managing Director and Acting Chair Antoinette Sayeh said.

"The authorities' early response and continuing actions - including the temporary suspension of the fiscal rule to raise health spending, as well as to assist vulnerable households and businesses - are welcome and supporting the economy through the recession," she added. In the meantime, unexpected deterioration in the macroeconomic and fiscal situation due to the pandemic has resulted in larger balance of payments needs, Sayeh said. New IMF support will help Colombia with external crisis, including migrants flow from Venezuela, she added.

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#### Trudeau Announces Vaccine Deal as Canada Surpasses 150,000 COVID-19 Cases

TORONTO, September 25 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday announced that his government has entered into an agreement with British pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca to procure 20 million doses of its coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccine.

The number of COVID-19 cases in Canada has surpassed 150,000 with 9,250 deaths reported, government data revealed on Friday.

"I can announce that we've reached an agreement with AstraZeneca for the vaccine they are developing with the University of Oxford. This agreement secures up to 20 million doses for Canadians, should the vaccine trials be successful," Trudeau said at a press conference.

The US put a pause on AstraZeneca vaccine trials a couple weeks ago due to side effects. A combined 1,046 new cases in Ontario and Quebec pushed Canada's tally to 150,140, according to data released by provincial health agencies. There are 11,138 active cases throughout the country, Canada's public health agency says.

With the announcement, Canada now has tentative deals for at least 12 vaccine candidates, Minister of Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand said. According to reports, the deals do not preclude refunds, even in the event that the vaccine candidate is never approved. The Canadian government has committed over \$800 million toward vaccine procurement development.

Trudeau also announced that Canada will contribute \$328.32 million to COVAX, a global vaccine distribution system backed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance. The Prime Minister expressed his disappointment with "a few large countries" that did not join the international effort – presumably referring to the US, China and Russia, which are focusing on domestic vaccine production.

On Wednesday, Trudeau said that the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic is "already underway" in Canada and urged vigilance. This was partially contradicted on Friday by Alberta's chief medical officer of health Dr. Deena Hinshaw, who said that second wave of COVID-19 has not hit the province.

Since the beginning of September, Canadian authorities have recorded more than 20,000 new infections, including more than 8,000 in the last week alone.

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**US Should Stop Blaming China Over Coronavirus Pandemic, Take Responsibility - Envoy to UN**

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - The US government should stop blaming China for spreading the novel coronavirus and take responsibility for the way it handled the outbreak in the United States, Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said in a statement on Friday.

The UN Security Council held a meeting a day earlier on post-COVID-19 global governance, during which US Ambassador Kelly Craft, citing US President Donald Trump's speech at the General Assembly, called for holding China accountable for "unleashing this plague into the world."

"I must say, enough is enough. You have created enough troubles for the world already," Zhang said. "The United States should understand that its failure in handling COVID-19 is totally its own fault."

Zhang noted that nearly 7 million people have been infected with the novel coronavirus in the United States and more than 200,000 have died.

"With the most advanced medical technologies and system in the world, why the US has turned out to have the most confirmed cases and fatalities?" Zhang asked.

"If someone should be held accountable, it should be a few US politicians themselves," the diplomat said.

Zhang also noted that creating confrontation and division at the United Nations will not help to defeat the virus. On the contrary, that approach has already seriously disrupted the international community's efforts, he said.

"The United States is now standing against the international community, and completely isolated. It's time to wake up," Zhang said.

In order to be a force for good, the United States must lead by example, promote cooperation among nations and contribute to humanity, Zhang added.

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**US COVID-19 Cases Rise from 6 to 7Mln in Under 1 Month - Johns Hopkins University**

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The number of confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the United States has risen from six to seven million in less than one month, the Johns Hopkins University tally revealed on Friday.

On August 31, the number of confirmed cases in the United States surpassed 6 million, while on September 25, the number stands at 7,005,746.

The data also shows that there are 203,240 COVID-19 related deaths in the United States.

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#### US Embassy in Baku Issues Travel Alert Amid Tensions at Armenia-Azerbaijan Border

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US citizens should reconsider their travels in some parts of Azerbaijan due to increased tensions on the border with Armenia, the American embassy in Baku said on Friday.

"The US Embassy in Azerbaijan urges US citizens to reconsider non-essential travel outside of the Absheron Peninsula due to heightened tensions and recent violence along portions of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border," the embassy said in a statement.

Diplomatic missions also instructed its employees and their families not to travel outside of the Absheron Peninsula. The embassy urged Americans to monitor local news, exercise caution and avoid crowds.

The two neighbors have clashed over control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region since the early 1990s. The latest armed clashes broke out in July, which left 12 Azerbaijani troops dead, according to Baku, while Armenia also reported casualties.

On Monday, the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry reported another incident of escalation at the border with Armenia, adding that one serviceman was killed as a result of shelling.

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#### Pakistan Urges UN to Establish International Day to Combat Islamophobia - Prime Minister

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has called on the UN General Assembly on Friday to establish an international day to fight Islamophobia.

"This Assembly should declare an international day to combat Islamophobia," Khan said in his remarks.

Khan pointed out that the pandemic offered an opportunity to bring humanity together, however, it had instead increased global tensions and boosted racial and religious hatred as well as Islamophobia.

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#### Florida Governor Lifts COVID-19 Restrictions on Restaurants Despite Pandemic Spreading

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The US state of Florida is lifting COVID-19 restrictions on restaurants and entering the final phase of its recovery plan, Governor Ron De Santis said on Friday.

"We are today moving into Phase III," De Santis said at a press conference. "There will not be limitations for the restaurants from the state of Florida."

De Santis said he was signing an order that would guarantee restaurants could operate at a minimum of 50 percent occupancy, regardless of local rules.

The number of daily COVID-19 cases has risen this month for the first time since July, according to the Tampa Bay times.

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#### Pakistan's Prime Minister Urges UN Chief to Hold Summit on Global Conflicts Prevention

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan called on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday to convene a high-level summit on preventing global conflicts.

"I urge the Secretary-General to take the lead in preventing global conflicts," Khan said in his remarks to the UN General Assembly. "We should convene summit-level meetings to address regional hotspots and resolve outstanding disputes."

Khan said the United Nations represents the most legitimate platform for cooperation in managing confrontations, such as the conflict in Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian struggle and the dispute over the Jammu and Kashmir region between India and Pakistan.

He added that for the United Nations and its Security Council to be responsive to the modern challenges, the organization needs to undergo a comprehensive reform.

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#### Canadian Air Force Intercepts Russian Su-27 Near Romanian Airspace - Statement

TORONTO, September 25 (Sputnik) - The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) intercepted a Russian Su-27 fighter jet over the Black Sea near Romanian airspace, the Department of National Defense said in a statement on Friday.

"Two Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) CF-18 Hornet fighter jets from Operation REASSURANCE's Air Task Force Romania intercepted a Russian Su-27 Flanker operating near Romanian airspace over the Black Sea on September 23, 2020," the statement said. The CF-18's were scrambled by NATO's southern Combined Air Operations Centre at Torrejon, Spain, the defense department said.

Russia's frontier region has become a hotbed for activity with the Russian military scrambling fighter jets to head off NATO aircraft at least 20 times since the start of the month.

The Russian military's official newspaper Krasnaya Zvezda reported on Friday that the Russian Armed Forces detected 43 foreign jets that were engaged in reconnaissance activities close to country's airspace last week.

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US Navy Commissions New Guided Missile Destroyer This Weekend - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The US Navy is going to commission its latest Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer at a private ceremony in Florida on Saturday because of continuing concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Defense said in a news release on Friday.

"The US Navy will commission the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Delbert D. Black (DDG 119) during a... ceremony on Saturday, September 26, 2020, in Port Canaveral, Florida," the release said.

Due to public health and safety concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the commissioning will be conducted as a private event, rather than the traditional public commissioning ceremony, the Defense Department said.

The Delbert D. Black was built by Huntington Ingalls Industries in Pascagoula, Mississippi and will be the 68th Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer to be delivered to the US Navy, the release noted.

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US Special Envoy for Northern Ireland Mulvaney to Visit Region Next Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Northern Ireland Mick Mulvaney will travel the Belfast, London and Dublin from September 27 to October 2 to discuss regional issues, the Department of State said in a statement on Friday.

"Throughout his travel, Ambassador Mulvaney will highlight strong US support for Northern Ireland, including the prospect of increased trade and investment ties between the United States and Northern Ireland," the statement read.

The State Department said Mulvaney will meet in Belfast with representatives of the Northern Ireland's devolved government and civil society to discuss US policy priorities in the region. Mulvaney will exchange views with his counterparts on current political and economic developments in light of the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic and the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, the statement said.

In Dublin, Mulvaney will meet with senior leaders to affirm the United States' commitment to the peace and prosperity of Ireland, while in London he will discuss bilateral cooperation on Northern Ireland with members of British parliament and government, the statement added.

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## Germany Requests UNSC to Discuss Confidential Report on Mercenaries in Libya - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - Germany has requested the UN Security Council to discuss a confidential report by the Libya Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts on the issue of foreign mercenaries fighting in the Libyan war, Germany's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Gunter Sautter told reporters on Friday.

"I would like to say a word on an AOB ["Any Other Business" discussions at the UN Security Council] that we are bringing to the Council. As a chair of the Libya Sanctions Committee, I will bring an important matter... Many delegations have asked for the publication of the panel of experts' interim report. This would create much-needed transparency," Sautter said.

The German diplomat said the publication of the report would allow naming those actors who violate the United Nations arms embargo on Libya and strengthen the political process that was launched at the Berlin Conference in January.

Sautter noted that the delegations of Russia and China have already voiced their opposition for such a discussion at the UN Security Council.

"I hope that the two delegations who have problems with this will give the green light," Sautter added.

Western media outlets have reported the claims of UN experts that Russia's Wagner Group and other paramilitary organizations are present in Libya to support the Libyan National Army (LNA). Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said citizens of Western countries were also mentioned in the media reports, but the Western diplomats keep sidestepping the issue.

Libya has been torn apart between two rival governments since the US-supported overthrow and assassination of the country's long-time leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The western part of the country, including the capital of Tripoli, is controlled by the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), while the eastern part is controlled by the Tobruk-based parliament that is supported by the LNA.

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## US, UK Sign Declaration to Boost Developing Artificial Intelligence - White House

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The United States and the United Kingdom have signed a declaration proclaiming their partnership in developing Artificial Intelligence (AI), the White House announced in a media note on Friday.

"We intend to establish a bilateral government-to-government dialogue on the areas identified in this vision and explore an AI R&D [research and development] ecosystem that promotes the mutual wellbeing, prosperity, and security of present and future generations," the declaration said as quoted by the note.

The two countries agreed to promote research and development in AI, focus on challenging technical issues and protect against efforts to adopt and apply these technologies in the service of authoritarianism and repression, the note said.

The United States and the United Kingdom would also cooperate on harnessing AI technologies to empower their citizens, improve their quality of life, and promote a technology ecosystem that enabled innovation to flourish by integrating AI into their economies, the note said.

The declaration was signed by US Chief Technology Officer Michael Kratsios, UK Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Alok Sharma and UK Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Oliver Dowden, the note added.

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Virginia Health Official Warns Planned Trump Rally Poses Risk - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - A senior Virginia public health official has warned that President Donald Trump's scheduled rally for 4,000 people in Newport poses a significant public health threat, USA Today reported on Friday.

Virginia Department of Public Health District Director Natasha Dwamena said the rally scheduled to be held on Friday night posed a severe public health threat given the novel coronavirus pandemic and advised the US president to cancel it, the report said.

Virginia Governor Ralph Northam has banned all gatherings of more than 250 people in Virginia to slow down the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Earlier on Friday, Northam's office announced that he and his wife, First Lady Pamela Northam, have both tested positive for the novel coronavirus and Mrs. Northam has been exhibiting mild symptoms.

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Breonna Taylor's Family Demands Grand Jury Transcripts - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Breonna Taylor's family lawyer Benjamin Crump demanded during a press conference on Friday the release of transcripts of the grand jury proceedings during which no police officer that executed a drug raid on Taylor's house was found guilty in her death.

"We are standing here today united in solidarity and demanding that he release the transcripts of the grand jury proceedings so we can know if there was anybody giving a voice to Breonna Taylor," Crump said.

The release of the transcripts is a condition put forth by the Taylor family to accept the grand jury's decision, Crump said.

"Breonna Taylor's entire family is heartbroken, devastated and outraged and confused and bewildered just like all of us as to what the Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron presented to the grand jury. Did he present any evidence on Breonna Taylor's behalf or did he make a unilateral decision to put his thumb on the scales of justice to help, try to exonerate and justify the killing of Breonna Taylor by these police officers?" Crump said.

The grand jury returned no indictments of the police officers who participated in executing the search warrant, including the one who probably shot Taylor in her apartment. An officer was found guilty of wanton endangerment since his bullets made their way to a neighboring apartment.

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Pompeo to Discuss Libya Developments With Italy's Conte - US State Dept.

\*WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will discuss the developments in Libya with Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio during his visit to Rome next week, a State Department senior official told reporters on Friday.

"I am sure, there will opportunity to discuss developments in Libya," the State Department official said.

The United States confirms its commitment to the diplomatic process and will provide relevant support for the resolution of the current challenges in Libya, the official said, adding that there is no military solution for the conflict in the country.

The State Department said earlier that Pompeo will discuss during his trip to Italy the situation regarding the novel coronavirus pandemic as well as regional security issues.

In addition to visiting Italy, Pompeo will also visit the Vatican, Croatia and Greece from September 27 to October 2.

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Trump Sets Up New US Institute to Fight Pandemics in Africa - White House

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration is creating a new institute to combat the threat of future epidemics to the population of Africa, the White House announced in a statement on Friday.

"National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien announced the intent to establish the United States-Africa Institute for Epidemic Preparedness and Innovation," the statement said.

The White House described the new institute as a "transformative partnership" with leading US Historically Black Colleges and Universities that will be targeted to deliver tangible results in preventing pandemics.

"The US-Africa Institute will build the leadership and capacity of African health professionals, support African technological innovation, and create a data hub to support the rapid detection and mitigation of pandemics," the statement said.

The institute will seek to prevent, detect, and respond to disease outbreaks, including HIV and other health threats and generate a new era of two-way partnership with the African continent, the statement added.

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**Palestine Leader Abbas Proposes Convening International Peace Conference 'Early Next Year'**

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas on Friday urged the United Nations to convene early next year an international conference to relaunch the Middle East peace process with an ultimate aim of putting an end to the Israeli occupation.

"I call on the Secretary General of the United Nations [Antonio Guterres] to start preparations in cooperation with the Quartet [Russia, the United States, the European Union and the United Nations] and the Security Council for an international conference early next year that brings together all relevant parties," Abbas said in a prerecorded video address to the UN General Assembly.

Abbas said the conference should have a full authority to launch a genuine peace process based on international law and relevant terms of reference.

"It should aim to end the occupation, grant the Palestinian people their freedom and independence in their own state along the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as capital and to settle all final status issues, notably the refugee question," Abbas said.

The Palestinian leader denounced the US-brokered agreements the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed with Israel as a violation of the principles of a just and lasting solution under international law and of the Arab peace initiative that offered Israel normalization as a prize for ending the occupation of Palestinian territories.

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**Pope Francis Says Important to Reduce Int'l. Sanctions to Safeguard Support for Peoples**

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - Pope Francis said in his speech to the UN General Assembly on Friday that it is crucial to ease international sanctions against countries struggling to provide the necessary support to their people.

"I also reiterate the importance of reducing international sanctions, as they make it harder for states to provide appropriate support to their peoples," Pope Francis said.

The Pope paid particular attention to the challenges brought about by the erosion of multilateralism and shrinking solidarity among nations, including during humanitarian crises that have become "the status quo."

However, the Pope said the ongoing novel coronavirus crisis represents an opportunity for the United Nations to bring about a more "fraternal and compassionate" world.

At the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic in March, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had also called for rolling back of international sanctions.

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RPT - Pope Francis Expresses Hope in UNGA Speech NPT Conference Will Help End Arms Race

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - Pope Francis said in his address to the UN General Assembly on Friday that he expects the review conference of the parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to result in specific measures to end the arms race as soon as possible.

"The Holy See hopes that the forthcoming review conference for the NPT treaty will lead to concrete measures being taken in line with our common intention to see the end of the arms race, the nuclear arms race as soon as possible," Pope Francis said. "We do hope that effective measures will be taken towards achieving nuclear disarmament."

Pope Francis pointed out that nuclear deterrence promotes the spirit of fear and mistrust among nations and ends up in poisoning relations and hindering dialogue.

"That is why it is so important that we support the main international legal instruments for nuclear disarmament, nonproliferation and prohibition," he said.

The 2020 review conference was planned to take place at the United Nations headquarters in New York in April. However, in light of the novel coronavirus restrictions, the parties decided to postpone the conference to a later date, but no later than April 2021.

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Trump's New Sanctions Against Cuba 'Crude Attempt' to Gain Votes - Mission to UN

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration's new sanctions against Cuba are an attempt to win votes from some Cubans in the United States in the upcoming November 3 presidential election, the Permanent Mission of Cuba to the United Nations said in a statement on Friday.

"[T]hey are a crude attempt to try to gain votes a few weeks before the presidential election in the United States, appealing to the political electoral machinery of south Florida, but without considering the true aspirations of Cubans and US persons of Cuban origin," the statement said.

On Wednesday, US President Donald Trump announced that any person subject to US jurisdiction will be prohibited from lodging, paying for lodging or making any reservation for or on behalf of a third party to lodge at any property identified as owned or controlled by the Cuban government, a prohibited Cuban official or their close relatives. In addition, the Trump administration banned Cuban alcohol and tobacco products from being imported in the United States.

The Cuban mission to the United Nations said the new provisions are an expression of the constant aggression of the US government in its attempts to suffocate the Cuban economy and people while violating the US citizens' rights to travel to the island nation.

The latest restrictive measures are an addition to several others already implemented this year by the Trump administration that compound the economic hardships Cuba faces as a result of the impact of the novel coronavirus, the statement said.

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Virginia Governor Northam, Wife Both Test Positive for Coronavirus - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Virginia Governor Ralph Northam and his wife Pamela have both tested positive for the novel coronavirus and have voluntarily gone into isolation, a press release from the governor's office said on Friday.

"Both the Governor and First Lady received PCR [polymerase chain reaction] nasal swab tests yesterday afternoon, and both tested positive," the release said. "Governor Northam is experiencing no symptoms. First Lady Pamela Northam is currently experiencing mild symptoms. Both remain in good spirits."

On Wednesday evening, the Northams were notified that a member of the governor's official residence staff, who works closely within the couple's living quarters, had developed symptoms and then tested positive for the novel coronavirus, the release said.

"Governor Northam is experiencing no symptoms. First Lady Pamela Northam is currently experiencing mild symptoms. Both remain in good spirits," the release added.

Northam is in constant contact with his cabinet and staff and will fulfill his duties from the Executive Mansion in Richmond, according to the release.

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Debt Payment Suspended For Poorest Countries Till End-2020 Due To COVID-19 - G7 Ministers

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The Group of Seven nations will extend a debt freeze for the world's poorest nations until the end of the year in order to help them cope with the coronavirus pandemic, G7 finance ministers said in a joint statement on Friday.

"To support our efforts to help the most vulnerable countries, we are implementing the G20-Paris Club Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) to suspend official bilateral debt payments for the poorest countries through end-2020," the ministers said in a statement issued via the US Treasury Department.

The DSSI has been fundamental in supporting 43 countries by freeing up \$5 billion in fiscal space to fund social, health, and economic measures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, the statement said.

Nonetheless, the program has faced shortcomings that have prevented it from delivering its full potential, said the G7 finance ministers, who expressed regret particularly by some countries to classify large state-owned, government-controlled financial institutions as commercial lenders and not as official bilateral creditors, without providing comparable treatment nor transparency. This significantly reduced the magnitude of the initiative and the benefits of the DSSI for developing countries, they added.

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India Wants Talks on UNSC Membership Expansion to Take Place in 'Fixed Timeframe' - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - India believes the time has arrived to enlarge the membership of the UN Security Council and desires to see negotiations on the matter in a fixed timeframe, India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations T. S. Tirumurti said in an interview with Sputnik.

"We believe that the time has indeed already come to move towards a result-oriented process, with provision for substantive negotiations based on a single comprehensive text, in a formal setting in a fixed time frame," Tirumurti said when asked about its initiative to expand the UN Security Council membership.

Tirumurti explained the UN Security Council expansion with both, permanent and non-permanent members, should include states from emerging and developing countries in Asia, Latina America and Africa.

However, nations are "nowhere close" at present to even agree on the need to add more members in the most influential body of the United Nations, Tirumurti said.

The stalemate in reforming the UN Security Council may seriously infringe on the ability to maintain international peace and security that is its primary responsibility, Tirumurti also said.

"We cannot allow reforms to be held hostage by those who would prefer the status quo and stop progress," he added.

The UN Security Council is comprised of the five permanent member states - China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States - and ten non-permanent members elected for two-year terms by the UN General Assembly.

In June, India was elected to occupy the non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council and its term will start on January 1.

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WHO Resourcing, Regulations Must Be Considered to Resolve Shortcomings - India's UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - The World Health Organization (WHO) needs to look at resourcing and regulatory parameters in order to address issues and become more effective, India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations T.S. Tirumurti told Sputnik.

"Every institution must evolve to meet the needs of its time," Tirumurti said on Thursday.

"Therefore, we need to consider the resourcing and regulatory parameters set out for the World Health Organization to address and resolve shortcomings so as to make the Organization more effective for the current time."

Tirumurti also pointed out that all multilateral institutions need to undergo reformation to remain "purpose-built."

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly accused the WHO of being biased in favor of China and of having failed to respond immediately to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. In April, the US leader announced a temporary freeze of the US funding for the WHO and warned

that the freeze would become permanent unless the organization committed to major changes within the 30 days.

In late May, Trump announced that Washington was terminating its relationship with the WHO and redirecting funds to other global health needs.

The WHO has in the recent months been facing criticism over its response to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

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India Seriously Considering Russia's Security Concept for Persian Gulf - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - New Delhi has given serious consideration to the Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region proposed by Russia last year and finds such a discussion useful, India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations T.S. Tirumurti told Sputnik.

"Any proposal from Russia is given serious consideration by us. In this particular context, we have noted the proposal put forth by Russia," Tirumurti said on Thursday. "In fact, an Indian expert had participated in the Track 2 Conference held in Moscow last September and found the discussions exploratory and useful."

Any security architecture for the Persian Gulf must be inclusive, considering the interests of all countries from and beyond the region, Tirumurti said.

He added that India has been playing a "leading role" in maintaining peace and security in the area of its "strategic importance," including through the enhancement of the cooperation among countries within the Gulf area and increased naval presence.

The Russian Foreign Ministry unveiled in July 2019, amid heightened US-Iran tensions, an updated version of an initiative called Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region, which proposed the "renouncement of permanent deployment of troops of extra-regional states"

in the region. The concept further promotes multilateralism as the core of the new security system in the region. Moscow has also suggested that a security organization be created that would include Russia, the United States, China, India, the European Union and other interested parties.

Tensions have escalated in the Persian Gulf last year, in large part due to the standoff between the United States and Iran over the 2015 nuclear deal as Washington unilaterally withdrew from the pact last year, which prompted Tehran to begin rolling back its nuclear commitments. A series of attacks on tankers in Gulf waters and, most recently, a drone attack against oil facilities of Saudi Arabia have worsened the situation, with Washington and its allies placing the blame on Iran. Tehran has refuted all accusations.

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India Has No Plans to Address Border Dispute With China at UN - Envoy to Sputnik

UNITED NATIONS, September 25 (Sputnik) - India has no plans to address at the United Nations the issue of border clashes with China, India's Permanent Representative to the UN T.S. Tirumurti told Sputnik.

"Both sides have the maturity to deal these issues bilaterally through the existing confidence-building mechanisms. We are already doing this," Tirumurti said on Thursday when asked whether his country would be requesting a discussion at the United Nations on the issue. "We do not see a role for the UN in our bilateral matters."

Such conflicts are a permanent fixture of India-China relations, as the countries do not have a marked border but rather the Line of Actual Control, created after the 1962 war between the nations. However, the tensions became more strained as a result of skirmishes between the countries' border forces starting in May.

In order to normalize the situation, the commanders of the regional forces, as well as diplomats from both sides, conducted a series of negotiations. Nevertheless, tensions persist. On September 8, sources in the Indian Army told Sputnik that Indian and Chinese troops had exchanged warning shots along the LAC. The Indian Defense Ministry subsequently accused China of continuing to escalate tensions in the Eastern Ladakh region, stressing that the Indian Army did not resort to any aggressive actions.

In regards to the issue of the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir, Tirumurti said India desires neighborly relations with Pakistan and is committed to addressing problems in a bilateral and peaceful manner.

"Any meaningful dialogue with Pakistan can only be held in an atmosphere free of terror, hostility and violence," Tirumurti added. "The onus is on Pakistan to create such a conducive atmosphere."

On August 5, 2019, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind signed a decree removing the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, which was granted to the region by Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. Under an initiative of the federal government, the region will be divided into two union territories.

Pakistan, which has long claimed the Kashmir region, partially located in the state, strongly condemned the move.

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US Attorney General Says Sub-Source of Steele Dossier Was Probed for Alleged Russia Ties

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General William Barr in a letter to Senate Judiciary Chairman Lindsey Graham said the primary sub-source of the Steele Dossier was investigated by the FBI in 2016 for alleged ties to Russian intelligence.

"A footnote in the Inspector General's report contains information, which up till now has been classified and redacted, bearing on the reliability of the Steele dossier," Barr said in the letter on

Thursday. "The FBI has declassified the relevant portion of that footnote, number 334, which states that "[t]he Primary Sub-source was the subject of an FBI counterintelligence investigation from 2009 to 2011 that assessed his/her documented contacts with suspected Russian intelligence officers."

The Crossfire Hurricane investigation was a counterintelligence probe conducted by the FBI in 2016 to reveal whether there was collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government leading up to the 2016 US election. The FBI's investigation was eventually taken over by Special Counsel Robert Mueller who acknowledged there was no Trump-Russia collusion.

The FBI conducted a three-day interview with Steele's so-called Primary Sub-source in January of 2017.

Russia has repeatedly denied allegations of interference in the US political system, saying such practice is contrary to the country's foreign policy. US President Donald Trump has similarly denied collusion with Russia in the 2016 election.

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US Executes First Black Man Since Resumption of Federal Death Penalty - Media Witness

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The US government has executed the seventh inmate and first Black man since the resumption of the federal death penalty, a media witness on the scene said.

Christopher Vialva, 40, was executed on Thursday afternoon for killing two youth ministers in the state of Texas in 2000. Time of death was 6:42 p.m. EST (10:42 p.m. GMT)," WHTI correspondent Alia Blackburn said in a tweet.

Blackburn later corrected the time of death to 6:46 p.m. EST (10:46 p.m. GMT).

Vialva's lawyer claimed that racial bias had a role in his client being given a death sentence. However, the US Supreme Court denied Vialva's request for a stay just hours before the execution was carried out.

In August, the United States executed the only Native American on federal death row, Lezmond Mitchell.

The United States resumed the federal death penalty in July after a 17-year hiatus.

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US Sentencing of Russian National Tyurin Moved to November 5 - Court Notice

NEW YORK, September 25 (Sputnik) - The sentencing of Russian national Andrei Tyurin on hacking charges has been rescheduled for November 5, a court notice revealed.

Tyurin, who was originally supposed to be sentenced on Friday, September 25, will now appear before Judge Laura Taylor Swain in a New York federal court at 10:00 a.m. EST (2:00 p.m. GMT) on November 5, according to the notice.

Tyurin was arrested in Georgia in 2017 at US government request. The US authorities alleged that Tyurin was involved in a global hacking campaign targeting financial institutions that resulted in the theft of personal data from more than 100 million users.

Georgia extradited Tyurin to the United States in September 2018.

In 2019, Tyurin pleaded guilty to six counts, including conspiracy to commit computer hacking, wire fraud, conspiracy to violate the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act, and conspiracy to commit bank fraud, the Justice Department said in a statement.

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#### Facebook Says Took Down 3 Russia-Originated Social Media Networks

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Facebook has removed three networks allegedly originating from Russia and primarily focusing on affairs in Syria and Ukraine, the company's Head of Security Policy Nathaniel Gleicher said in a statement.

"We removed three separate networks for violating our policy against foreign or government interference which is coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) on behalf of a foreign or government entity. These networks originated in Russia," Gleicher said on Thursday.

Facebook removed a total of 242 users, 41 Pages, 19 Groups and 45 Instagram accounts, the statement said.

Aside from Ukraine and Syria, the content targeted users from several states neighboring Russia with a small portion targeting the United States and the United Kingdom, the statement said.

Some of the fake accounts were used to portray seemingly independent media outlets and to drive online users to off-platform sites, the statement said.

Facebook pointed out in the release that the suspended networks and accounts had a "very limited following" at the time of the takedown.

Gleicher said Facebook is actively monitoring potential leaks released through the platform ahead of the upcoming US presidential election.

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

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#### US Executes First Black Man Since Resumption of Federal Death Penalty - Media Witness

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Inmate Christopher Vialva, 40, was executed Thursday afternoon for killing two youth ministers in the state of Texas in 2000. Time of death was 6:42 p.m. EST (10:42 p.m. GMT), WHTI correspondent Alia Blackburn said in a tweet.

Vialva's lawyer claimed that racial bias had a role in his sentence. Hours before the execution, the US Supreme Court denied Vialva's request for a stay.

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Pompeo to Travel to Greece, Italy September 27 to Discuss Security - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Sunday will embark on a week-long trip to Greece, Italy and Croatia to meet with high-level officials and discuss security matters, the Department of State said in a release.

"Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo will travel to Greece, Italy, the Holy See, and Croatia September 27 to October 2," the release said on Thursday.

Pompeo will meet with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias to discuss security matters related to the eastern Mediterranean, the release said. During the visit, Pompeo will sign a bilateral science and technology agreement and will meet with energy sector business leaders for a discussion on energy diversification and infrastructure projects in Greece, the release said.

In Italy, Pompeo will meet with Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio to discuss matter related to the novel coronavirus pandemic and security in the region. Pompeo will conclude his trip on October 2 in Croatia, where he will meet with Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, Foreign Minister Gordan Grlic and Defense Minister Mario Banozic, the release said.

Pompeo and the Croatian officials will discuss opportunities to bolster bilateral cooperation in defense, trade, and Croatia's efforts to advance the integration of the so-called Western Balkans, the release added.

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Boeing Wins \$2.2Bln Order for US Air Force Bomb Upgrade Program - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - Boeing has won a more than \$2.23 billion order to manufacture upgraded versions of the Small Diameter Bomb for the US Air Force and seven allied nations, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"The Boeing Company [of] St. Louis, Missouri, has been awarded a \$2,239,707,532 ...contract for the Small Diameter Bomb Increment weapon program," the release said on Thursday. "This contract involves Foreign Military Sales to Australia, Belgium, Israel, Japan, Korea, Netherlands and Norway."

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FBI Investigating 'Potential Issues' With Mail-In Ballots in Pennsylvania - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The FBI is investigating potential issues with mail-in ballots in the US state of Pennsylvania and has found that a small number of military ballots were discarded there, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"On Monday, September 21, 2020, at the request of Luzerne County District Attorney Stefanie Salavantis, the Office of the United States Attorney along with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Scranton Resident Office, began an inquiry into reports of potential issues with a small number of mail-in ballots at the Luzerne County Board of Elections," the release said on Thursday. "At this point we can confirm that a small number of military ballots were discarded." Seven of the ballots were cast for US President Donald Trump, but the contents of the other two are unknown since they were resealed inside their appropriate envelopes by Luzerne elections staff prior to recovery by the FBI.

The Justice Department noted that some of the ballots can be attributed to specific voters and some cannot.

FBI personnel together with the Pennsylvania State Police have conducted numerous interviews and reviewed physical evidence and Luzerne County election officials have been cooperative, the Justice Department said.

Trump has repeatedly claimed that widespread mail-in voting could result in significant election fraud and has pointed to recent problems in local elections in New York, New Jersey and other places. The Democrats have said Trump's claims are unfounded.

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Weapons of Mass Destruction Use Against US Homeland Remains Top Worry- Counterterror Chief

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - The threat that terrorists or other non-state actors may acquire nuclear, biological or chemical weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) to use against the United States remains a top worry and more attacks will likely come, National Counterterrorism Center Director Christopher Miller said.

"Our enemies will successfully attack us again," Miller told a hearing of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs said on Thursday. "My principal concern is their acquisition and eventual use of weapons of mass destruction."

Miller said the United States was also close to a historic turning point in the War on Terror where it hoped soon to be able to hand over the leading role in combating various regional terrorist threats to major state allies in different areas.

The Islamic State terror group (outlawed in Russia) was now in crisis with its Caliphate s destroyed, Miller noted.

However, the US government and Congress must not disinvest in the War on Terror before it solidifies its gains because as wars neared their end, victory required continued commitment and focus, Miller said.

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**New York to Conduct Own Review of Coronavirus Vaccine Approved By Trump - Cuomo**

NEW YORK, September 25 (Sputnik) - New York State will conduct its own review of any coronavirus vaccine endorsed by the White House amid concerns that President Donald Trump was fast-tracking their development to help his reelection bid, Governor Andrew Cuomo said during a press conference.

"Frankly, I'm not going to trust the federal government's opinion and I wouldn't recommend to New Yorkers based on the federal government's opinion," Cuomo said on Thursday. "New York State will have its own review when the federal government is finished with its review and says 'it's safe.' We're going to put together our own review too."

On Wednesday, Trump said the White House could override the US Food and Drug Administration if the agency released tougher standards for the authorization of a coronavirus vaccine. Trump's comments came as the FDA weighed new coronavirus vaccine guidelines that would likely push an authorization date beyond the November 3 election.

Recent polls have revealed that more than half of the population in the United States is against receiving a coronavirus vaccine and does not trust the vaccine's safety or efficacy.

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**Trump Offers Help to Resolve India-China Dispute**

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump told reporters the United States would very much like to help India and China reconcile their border dispute.

"I know China now and India are having difficulty and a very substantial difficulty. Hopefully, they will be able to work that out. If we can help, we would love to help," Trump said before boarding a helicopter to leave the White House.

Military personnel from both countries clashed in June in the Galwan Valley, where the Indian region of Ladakh borders China's Aksai Chin region, in a confrontation that left both sides with dozens of casualties. Further confrontations have been reported as recently as September 8. The United States sent its condolences to India over killed and wounded servicemen. The Indian and Chinese foreign ministers held talks on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit earlier in September, with both sides agreeing to de-escalate tensions.

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#### US Judge Gives Trump Administration Until Friday to Withdraw TikTok Ban - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has ordered the Trump administration to postpone its ban on downloads of TikTok or defend itself in a court hearing this weekend brought by the Chinese-owner of the video-sharing application, the Wall Street Journal reported.

If Judge Nichols of the US District Court of Columbia decides on Sunday to halt the Trump administration's actions against TikTiok, it would be the second setback of its kind for the White House in a week, the report said on Thursday.

Another US federal judge last week temporarily blocked President Donald Trump's executive order curbing Americans' use of WeChat, a popular Chinese-owned messaging and e-commerce app.

The White House said US downloads of the application on the Apple Playstore and Android's Google Play will be restricted from Sunday and all of TikTok US operations will be banned on November 12 unless the company ceded its local controlling equity and technology to an American firm.

In August, Trump threatened to ban the application in the United States, citing wider concerns about alleged Chinese government spying on data of Americans using China-originated social media.

Trump's ban was originally to take effect on September 20, but was later deferred to November 12 after his administration offered the company a way out by allowing a US entity to acquire it. Trump said the software firm Oracle and retail giant Walmart were in final talks for assuming control of TikTok's equity and technology.

However, TikTok's parent company ByteDance has insisted to retain an 80 percent stake in the video-sharing platform's restructured US operations.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY  
WASHINGTON, September 25 (Sputnik)

#### UNREST IN US

\* Seattle police arrested 13 rioters overnight and several law enforcement officers were injured while dispersing a rally that erupted after a grand jury decided not to charge Louisville police officers in the death of African American woman Breonna Taylor.

\* A gunman who shot two police officers during the riots in Louisville, Kentucky, overnight has been charged with 16 criminal counts, interim Louisville Police Chief Robert Schroeder said.

\* Portland police announced the arrest of 13 protesters following a night of unrest after the grand jury decision in the Breonna Taylor case.

#### NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN

\* The United States has imposed sanctions on two individuals and four entities in Iran, the Treasury Department said in a statement on Thursday.

\* The Trump administration plans to announce new sanctions against Iranian officials and entities involved in the execution of 27-year-old wrestler Navid Afkari, US Special Representative for Iran and Venezuela Elliott Abrams said.

\* The United States is willing to re-establish diplomatic relations with Iran should Tehran choose to change its behavior and behave like a normal country rather than a cause, Abrams said in a congressional testimony.

#### US PRESIDENTIAL RACE

\* US President Donald Trump will agree with the results of the November 3 election if the vote is free and fair, White House spokesperson Kayleigh McEnany said on Thursday.

\* The FBI is investigating potential issues with mail-in ballots in the state of Pennsylvania, where it found a small number of discarded military ballots, the Justice Department said.

#### CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday that a return to coronavirus-related restrictions in the country would be a very unwelcome scenario and called on the people to stay on guard.

\* Russian Gamaleya research institute began trials of its Sputnik V vaccine on senior citizens and other at-risk groups, Kirill Dmitriev, the head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), said.

#### RUSSIA-IRAN RELATIONS

\* Iran will continue talks with Russia on defense cooperation and sees some areas of need in terms of weaponry that working with Russia and other countries could fill, the country's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif told Sputnik.

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin's proposal for "green corridors" - through which essential goods and medication could be transported smoothly amid the coronavirus pandemic - is absolutely necessary in the current situation and can help avoid trade wars, Zarif said.