

Wires 09/24/20

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Major Mail-In Vote Fraud in US 'Unprecedented,' Feds Remain Vigilant - FBI Director

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - There has never been any coordinated national fraud especially involving mail-in ballots to try and decide the result of a US federal election, FBI Director Christopher Wray told the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs in a hearing on Thursday.

"We have not seen, historically, any kind of coordinated national voter fraud effort in a major election, whether it is by mail or otherwise," Wray said.

Wray assured the Committee that the US voting system for national elections remained secure and that the FBI and other federal law enforcement agencies were closing monitoring this year's process for any signs of attack.

"We have not seen, historically, any coordinated national voter fraud in a major election. We have seen voter fraud in a local election from time to time. ... We are vigilant as to the threat and watching it carefully. We are in uncharted new territory," Wray said.

The continuing novel coronavirus pandemic has led to an unprecedented number of requests for mail-in voting to avoid the risk of infection at polling stations and some states have ruled it mandatory. President Donald Trump has repeatedly expressed concerns that the system may equally offer opportunities to fake or dispute the election outcome.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 2 Individuals, 4 Entities in Iran - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on two individuals and four entities in Iran, the US Treasury Department said in a statement on Thursday.

The Treasury Department's target list included Iranian judges Seyyed Mahmoud Sadati and Mohammad Soltani, as well as Branch 1 of the Shiraz Revolutionary court, and the Adel Abad, Orumiyeh and Vakilabad prisons.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a separate statement that all designated individuals and entities are responsible for gross violations of human rights, including torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, arbitrary detentions and denials of the right to liberty.

"These listings and sanctions come as Judge Sadati and Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court were reported to be involved in the appalling case of Navid Afkari, a young athlete who was imprisoned and brutally executed on September 12, 2020, by Iranian authorities," Pompeo said.

Pompeo said Soltani was sentencing Bahai believers for expressing their religious faith. Valikabad prison is responsible for detention of US citizen Michael White, Pompeo added. Pompeo accused Soltani for detaining three Americans - Baquer and Siamak Namazi, and Morad Tahbaz, and said the US government will continue to make every effort to bring them home.

The Iranian authorities had charged 27-year-old Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari with killing a security guard during the 2018 protests in Iran.

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FBI Director Wray Tells Congress China 'Greatest Counterintelligence Threat' Facing US

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - China is the greatest counterintelligence threat the United States faces, FBI Director Christopher Wray told a hearing of the US Senate Committee on Homeland Security on Thursday.

"China is the greatest counterintelligence threat to this country," Wray said. "[They are] much broader and wider in terms of their reach, they use economic levers very heavily."

The FBI currently listed more than 2,000 open espionage investigations with China, Wray told the Homeland Security Committee.

The FBI Director said there had been a 1,300 percent increase in espionage investigations involving China over the past decade and it now comprised by far the biggest part of the Bureau's counterintelligence portfolio.

The FBI has also been seeing aggressive activity by the Chinese to target US vaccine research, Wray added.

Acting Deputy Homeland Security Secretary Ken Cuccinelli said earlier that China has many more levers, which Iran and Russia do not have, as well as relations at every level of government and connections to the US economy.

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Alberta Premier Kenney Says Canada Prime Minister Trudeau COVID-19 Recovery Plan 'Fantasy'

TORONTO, September 24 (Sputnik) - Premier Jason Kenney of Alberta, Canada's largest oil-producing province, said during a press conference on Thursday that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's proposal for a COVID-19 economic recovery was a "fantasy plan."

"It was a fantasy plan for a mythical country that only exists, apparently, in the minds of Ottawa liberals and likeminded Laurentian elites," Kenney said.

The Alberta Premier said Trudeau's Throne Speech delivered on Wednesday did not reflect the harsh economic realities Canada is facing amid the novel coronavirus pandemic. Kenney also

said Trudeau completely ignored the ongoing economic crisis in western Canada and the growing sense of alienation in the region.

The Throne Speech did nothing to ameliorate the pressure Canadians in Alberta feel and, in fact, exacerbated it, Kenney said.

Speaking to reporters in Ottawa, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland downplayed the criticism pointing out to government investment to clean up orphan wells in Alberta and the COVID-19 benefit programs the federal government had introduced.

However, critics have denounced the Trudeau government's \$1.75 billion package for the oil sector, which includes the orphan well clean-up project, as a largely symbolic gesture. Kenney said western Canadians are not looking for handouts, but rather for non-interference from Ottawa. He added the Throne Speech represented "a full-frontal attack on Canadian federalism, on the constitution of Canada, on provincial jurisdiction."

Relations between Alberta and the federal government have soured in recent years amid the worst economic downturn in the province in decades, even spawning talk of a sovereignty movement known as 'Wexit.'

The Speech from the Throne is delivered by Her Majesty the Queen's representative in Canada, the Governor-General, on behalf of the prime minister at the commencement of a new parliamentary session following the suspension of proceedings outlining the government's vision for the country.

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Trump Leads in Texas by 5 Points, Biden Up 1% in Ohio - Battleground Poll

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump is up by 5 percent among likely voters in the toss-up state of Texas while his rival Joe Biden has a one point edge in Ohio, a Quinnipiac University Poll revealed on Thursday.

Texas and Ohio are among the ten largest so-called "battleground" or "swing" states that many believe could be decisive in determining the outcome in November.

Trump leads by a 50-45% margin in Texas while Biden has a 48-47% edge in Ohio, according to the poll of likely voters.

The pollster said the previous polls taken in these states are not comparable because those were of registered voters, not likely voters. That said, a Quinnipiac survey of registered voters in July showed Biden actually ahead in Texas by one point (45-44%) and up in Ohio by a point in June.

The poll also revealed that in both states Trump is the more favorable candidate for handling the economy, military and for keeping families safe.

According to an average of the most recent eight polls published on Realclearpolitics.com (RCP), the former vice president leads by 7 percent nationally, more than a point higher from the 5.8% on September 17. In Texas, Trump's lead is 3.6 percent and in Ohio Biden is up 1.3%.

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Trump Says Not Sure if 2020 US Presidential Election Will Be Honest

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump told reporters on Thursday that he is not certain this year's presidential election will be honest. "We want to make sure the election is honest and I'm not sure that it can be," Trump said, noting instances of problems with mail-in ballots. Earlier on Thursday, the Justice Department said the FBI is investigating potential issues with mail-in ballots in the US state of Pennsylvania and found that nine military ballots - all cast for Trump - were discarded. 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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US Imposes Sanctions on 2 Individuals, 4 Entities in Iran – Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) – The United States has imposed sanctions on two individuals and four entities in Iran, the Treasury Department said in a statement on Thursday. "The following individuals have been added to OFAC's {Office of Foreign Assets Control} SDN [Special Designated Nationals] List," the statement read. The Treasury's target list included Iranian judges Seyyed Mahmoud Sadati and Mohammad Soltani, as well as Branch 1 of the Shiraz Revolutionary court, and the Adel Abad, Orumiye and Vakilabad Prisons. Earlier in the day, US Special Representative for Iran and Venezuela said Washington would announce sanctions against Iranian officials and entities involved in the execution of 27-year-old wrestler Navid Afkari, who was accused of killing a security guard during the 2018 protests.

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US Senator Paul Accuses Black Lives Matter Movement of 'Funding Terrorists'

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US Senator Rand Paul on Thursday said the Black Lives Matter (BLM) has been funding terrorists to go from city to city across the United States and American corporate donors should realize this.

"Corporate America is giving millions of dollars to something they perceive as an anti-racist group. In reality, it is a group that is funding terror. And funding terrorists to go from city to city," Rand said at a Senate homeland security hearing. "Look at their exchanges online and social media. They are saying their goal is to terrorize public officials... Their goal is terrorism. They're admitting it."

Rand also said he hopes the officers shot in Louisville last night recover quickly. Social unrest erupted in Louisville on Wednesday after the state attorney general announced that no criminal charges will be filed against the police officers involved in the death of African-American woman Breonna Taylor in March.

FBI Director Christopher Wray during the same hearing said one of the most dangerous threats to domestic security was the targeting of law enforcement officers by anarchists. Earlier this month, Wray said right-wing white supremacists are the biggest threat to US security.

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GNA Head Sarraj Urges UN Member States to Reveal Libyan Assets, Help Reclaim Funds

UNITED NATIONS, September 24 (Sputnik) - Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) head Fayeza Sarraj on Thursday called on the United Nations member states to reveal if Libyan assets have been funneled to them and assist the GNA in reclaiming the assets.

"A lot of Libya's funds have escaped outside the country, therefore, we call on states to which these funds have escaped to reveal these funds and to assist in reclaiming our resources," Sarraj said in his speech to the UN General Assembly.

The GNA head said Libya needs to mobilize resources to overcome the challenges posed by the novel coronavirus pandemic and achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

A number of states worldwide froze Libya's assets they held after the anti-government protests broke out in the country in 2011 as per a February 26, 2011 UN resolution.

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

WASHINGTON, September 24 (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, the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"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. "At this point we can confirm that a small number of military ballots were discarded."

The FBI said in the release that it has conducted numerous interviews and reviewed certain physical evidence related to the matter, noting that Luzerne county has been cooperative. Nine discarded military ballots - all cast for President Donald Trump - have been recovered, the FBI added.

The FBI also said that it will share more information related to its findings later on Thursday. 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 claim is unfounded.

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Portland Says 13 Arrested During Protests Following Breonna Taylor Decision

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - Portland police announced the arrest of 13 protesters in a statement Thursday, following a night of unrest after a grand jury refused to charge Louisville police officers with the killing of African American woman Breonna Taylor. Protests erupted on Wednesday across the US cities of Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland and San Diego after a grand jury refused to charge police officers with the killing of the medical technician during a drug raid of her home in Louisville in March.

"There were 13 people arrested during the riot that took place Wednesday night and Thursday morning. The following are those booked in the Multnomah County Detention Center," the Portland Police Bureau said.

In Portland, protesters gathered outside the police's Central Precinct, hurling multiple rocks at the upper glass window and inflicting substantial damage to the building. The demonstrators also threw a Molotov Cocktail at officers.

The charges range from attempted murder to unlawful drug possession to interfering with law enforcement officers.

Taylor was killed in her home in March when police officers executed a drug search warrant. Taylor's boyfriend allegedly fired the first shot in self-defense fearing the entrants were burglars, which prompted the police officers to unleash a hail of bullets on the house, hitting Taylor several times.

Kentucky's state attorney general said the deadly use of force by the police officers involved was justified in order to protect themselves. One of the officers was, nevertheless, charged with wanton endangerment for discharging rounds that hit adjacent apartments.

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US Homeland Security Dept. Proposes Limiting Foreign Journalist Visas to 240 Days

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a statement on Thursday that it has proposed to limit the duration of visas issued to foreign journalists to 240 days with an opportunity to obtain a maximum extension of 240 days.

"This effort would create a fixed time period of admission for certain aliens, consistent with most other temporary visa classifications, while still allowing these aliens an opportunity to legally extend their stay or re-apply for admission where appropriate," Ken Cuccinelli, a senior DHS official performing the duties of Deputy Homeland Security Secretary, said in the statement. 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.

The DHS is also proposing putting limits on visas for foreign students in the United States ranging from two to four years. These visas also allow foreign nationals to remain in the United States for as long as they maintain compliance with the admission terms.

"Under the proposed rule, F or J nonimmigrants would be admitted into the United States for a period up to the end date of their program, not to exceed four years, unless DHS determines that the nonimmigrant is subject to a shorter period of authorized stay limited to two years," the statement said.

The DHS explained that the significant growth of the F, J and I visa programs has necessitated the proposed update "to ensure the integrity of the US immigration system." It added that no changes are proposed to "the underlying requirements to qualify for these nonimmigrant classifications."

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Trump to Accept Results of Free, Fair Election in November - White House

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump will agree with results of the election in November if it is free and fair, White House spokesperson Kayleigh McEnany said on Thursday.

"The President will accept the results of a free and fair election," McEnany said during a press briefing, when repeatedly asked to ensure "a peaceful transfer of power" in case of Trump's loss.

Several Democrats said that Trump is not going to win fairly, McEnany said. The spokesperson said the president will accept the will of the American people.

On Wednesday, Trump said that he thinks the 2020 US presidential election will end up in the Supreme Court, adding that it is important to immediately fill the vacancy left after Justice Ruth Ginsburg's death.

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US Senator Sanders Urges Lawmakers to Ensure Upcoming Presidential Election Free, Fair

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US Senator Bernie Sanders on Thursday called on all lawmakers in Congress to ensure that the upcoming November 3 presidential election is free and fair and the loser accepts the results.

"We must ensure in this unprecedented moment in American history that this is an election that is free and fair, an election in which voters are not intimidated, an election in which all votes are counted, an election in which the loser accepts the results," Sanders said.

On Wednesday, President Donald Trump was asked during a press conference whether there would be a peaceful transfer of power if he loses the vote to which he answered, "We're going to have to see what happens."

Trump has repeatedly claimed the Democrats may engage in vote harvesting via mail-in voting and other means, and has called on citizens to promptly inform the authorities if they witness any instance of election fraud. Trump has pointed to election fraud in recent elections in New York, New Jersey and other states.

Democrats have said Trump's claims are unfounded and have demanded that the US Postal Service ensure timely delivery of ballots due to fears of infections amid the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Sanders and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer sent a letter to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell earlier this month asking him to establish a nonpartisan committee to oversee the US election.

Earlier on Thursday, McConnell issued a statement saying the winner of the November presidential election will be inaugurated in an orderly transition on January 20 just as it has happened every four years since the inception of the United States.

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The DHS is also proposing putting limits on visas for foreign students in the United States ranging from two to four years, the statement added.

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

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - The FBI is investigating potential issues with mail-in ballots in the state of Pennsylvania, the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday, adding that so far the probe has uncovered only a small number of discarded ballots.

"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. "At this point we can confirm that a small number of military ballots were discarded."

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No Way Trump Will Shut US Economy Down Again Over COVID-19 - White House Adviser Kudlow

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump has no intent to shut the economy down again over the COVID-19, even as a study shows that 90 percent of the population may be vulnerable to the virus, White House Economic Adviser Larry Kudlow said on Thursday.

"First of all, let me say President Trump in no way would support another shutdown of the country and the economy. No way. He will completely oppose that," Kudlow said during an appearance on the Fox Business network.

The United States has reported nearly seven million infections from the novel strain of the coronavirus so far and more than 200,000 deaths, making it the worst country hit by the pandemic, data monitored by the Johns Hopkins University showed.

Nearly half of the 50 US states have reported a rise in new COVID-19 cases in recent weeks, with the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Robert Redfield saying a study by the agency showed more than 90 percent of the population was susceptible - meaning more than 295 million Americans could still get infected with the virus.

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US Attorneys Offices Charge Over 300 People for Crimes Committed During Nationwide Riots

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US Attorneys' Offices have charged more than 300 people in 29 states and Washington, DC for crimes committed during riots in various cities in the United States in the past four months, the Department of Justice said in a statement on Thursday.

"To date, of the 94 US Attorneys' Offices (USAOs), more than 40 USAOs have filed federal charges alleging crimes ranging from attempted murder, assaulting a law enforcement officer, arson, burglary of a federally-licensed firearms dealer, damaging federal property, malicious destruction of property using fire or explosives, felon in possession of a firearm and ammunition, unlawful possession of a destructive device, inciting a riot, felony civil disorder, and others," the statement said.

The Justice Department said about 80 people have been charged with offenses relating to arson and explosives, while 15 individuals indicted for damaging federal property, the Justice Department said.

"In some instances, these individuals are alleged to have set fires to local businesses as well as city and federal property," the statement said.

The repair of the damaged courthouses, police departments and other federal and private properties in affected cities like Seattle, Portland, Minneapolis and Nashville is estimated to cost tens of millions of dollars, the statement added.

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Trump Sued for Allegedly Stealing Niece's Inheritance - Court Documents

NEW YORK, September 24 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump was hit with a half-million-dollar lawsuit for allegedly stealing his niece's inheritance, court documents revealed on Thursday.

"Mary Trump was a teenager who inherited Interests of extraordinary value upon the premature death of her father. Her aunt and uncles - who called Mary 'honeybunch' - promised to watch over her Interests for her benefit. Instead, they swindled her. They conspired with her trustee, maneuvered to steal her money, and lied to her about it," the lawsuit said. "Plaintiff Mary L. Trump hereby demands a trial by jury (and) compensatory damages in excess of \$500,000." The lawsuit also retraces some of the allegations Mary Trump, a clinical psychologist, made in her book about the president entitled, "Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man," which was published in July.

The suit was filed in a New York state court in Manhattan against the president, his sister Maryanne Trump Barry, and the estate of his brother Robert Trump, who died in August. Mary Trump accused the president and the other defendants of moving to "squeeze" her out as they maneuvered to take control of the estate of her grandfather Fred Trump, the father of Donald Trump, who died in 1999.

"And in the end, they threatened her, put her infant nephew's life at risk, and used their position of power to con her into signing her interests away," says the suit, which seeks redress for

fraudulent misrepresentation, fraudulent concealment, inducement and misrepresentation, among others charges.

Trump, responding to his niece's book last month, dismissed it as "lies" and a political hit job ahead of the November 3 US election where the Republican president is locked in a tough battle with his Demoratic challenger Joe Biden.

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Abrams Tells Congress He Believes Iran Will Negotiate With US After November 3 Election

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative Elliott Abrams said during a congressional hearing on Thursday that he believes Iran will enter negotiations with the United States after the US presidential election scheduled for November 3.

"Obviously, Iran doesn't want to do it - doesn't want to give up the nuclear program, doesn't want to give up support for terrorism. So, in our view, the only way to do it is what we call a 'maximum pressure campaign. We think with that pressure, once our November election is over, they will come to the negotiating table," Abrams told the US Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. Abrams cited the failing Iranian currency as an example of the kind of pressure the United States seeks to put on Iran to force it into negotiations.

In addition, Abrams said the United States is willing to re-establish diplomatic relations with Iran should Tehran choose to behave like a country rather than a cause.

In case Iran behaves like a country , the United States may end the existing sanctions regime and the two countries may move forward on concluding trade agreements and establish direct flights.

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Six Nations Urge Belarus to Halt Internet Shutdowns, Protect Free Press - Statement

TORONTO, September 24 (Sputnik) - Canada, the US, Latvia, Germany, the UK and the Netherlands in a joint statement on Thursday called on Belarus to guarantee media freedom and refrain from Internet shutdowns.

"We call on Belarus to guarantee media freedom, refrain from Internet shutdowns and respect international human rights law," the statement issued by Global Affairs Canada said. "Journalists and other media workers in Belarus must be able to do their work without fear of detention, reprisals or restrictions (online and off-line)."

The undersigned members of the so-called Media Freedom Coalition also urged Belarusian authorities to immediately release all detained journalists.

Those responsible for attacks against media representatives must be held to account, the statement said.

On August 9, the Belarusian opposition organized protests after disputing the results of the presidential election in which incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko was reelected for a sixth term by winning 80 percent of the vote. The opposition insists that its candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, won the election.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly accused Western nations of direct interference in the situation. Moscow has also voiced its concern over the signs of foreign interference in the internal affairs of Belarus.

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US Seeks to Maintain Broad International Support for Afghan Peace Talks - Envoy Khalilzad

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is keen on maintaining the current level of international support for its diplomatic efforts to put an end to the conflict in Afghanistan, Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said on Thursday.

"On the regional and international... we started building consensus in support of the peace process. And - with the exception of Iran - every relevant stakeholder country and institution supported our first two documents - the agreement [with the Taliban] and the joint declaration [with the Afghanistan government]. Pakistan, India, all Central Asian countries, Russia, China, Indonesia, every nation in the EU, the UK, the UN and NATO," Khalilzad said during a webinar at the United States Institute of Peace.

The United States and the Taliban, Afghanistan's major armed opposition movement, signed a peace deal in February, paving the way to the reduction of violence in the country, gradual troops withdrawal and intra-Afghan negotiations which started in Qatar earlier this month.

"Moving forward we will focus on maintaining this momentum and encouraging this level of international support," Khalilzad said.

He singled out Iran for seeking to keep the US "entangled in the conflict without winning or losing, but paying high price in Afghanistan until there is an agreement between US and Iran."

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Louisville Police Arrest 127 in Riots, 2 Shot Officers Recovering - Chief

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - Police in the US city of Louisville, Kentucky made 127 arrests during September 23 riots, interim chief of the Metro Police Department Robert Shroeder told reporters on Thursday

Riots broke out in Louisville on Wednesday after the state attorney general announced that no criminal charges will be filed against the police officers involved in the death of African-American woman Breonna Taylor in March.

"Throughout the night we made 127 arrests in various locations, including downtown, that were protest-related," Shroeder said.

The police chief said the two officers shot during last night's protests are doing well and will survive.

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Yemen's Hadi Urges International Community to Avoid Collapse of Abandoned Oil Tanker Safer

UNITED NATIONS, September 24 (Sputnik) - Yemen's President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi in his speech to the UN General Assembly on Thursday urged the international community to prevent an impending catastrophe that could take place if the stranded oil tanker Safer off the country's coast breaks apart.

"Also, I'd like to call on the international community to seriously and urgently commit to putting an end to this imminent catastrophe of a Safer oil ship," Hadi said. "The Houthis are refusing access for a UN team to the oil tanker for repair and maintenance."

The United Nations has been attempting since July to send a technical mission to the decaying tanker, which is loaded with 1 million barrels of crude oil and can break apart or explode at any time.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in August called on the Houthi rebel movement that controls the nearby area close to the tanker to remove any obstacles and grant access to independent technical experts to conduct possible repairs.

An oil spill from the tanker would directly impact as many as 1.6 million people, causing catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects to the area around the port of Al-Hudaydah, according to the United Nations.

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US Offers Iran Dialogue on Afghanistan - Special Envoy

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is open to a dialogue on the future of Afghanistan with Iran, which remains the only stakeholder nation not supportive of the ongoing diplomatic efforts to bring peace to the country, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said on Thursday.

"We have offered to meet with Iranians on this issue, that they should join various fora, where we are there and they are there to discuss the future of Afghanistan," Khalilzad said during a webinar at the United States Institute of Peace.

Khalilzad accused Iran of seeking to keep the United States entangled in the conflict in Afghanistan without winning or losing, and Washington is monitoring Tehran's activities very closely.

"[T]here have been occasionally disturbing actions that have had a negative impact," Khalilzad said.

The Special Representative did not elaborate on the alleged actions, but warned the United States would respond to Tehran encouraging "groups close to Iran to take action against us and coalition partners."

The United States and the Taliban, Afghanistan's major armed opposition movement, signed a peace agreement in February that paved the way to reducing violence in the country, gradual foreign troop withdrawal and intra-Afghan negotiations.

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Gunman Who Shot 2 Policemen in Louisville Charged With 16 Criminal Counts - Police Chief

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - A gunman who shot two police officers during riots in Louisville, Kentucky, overnight has been charged with 16 criminal counts, interim Louisville Police Chief Robert Schroeder said during a press conference on Thursday.

Riots broke out in Louisville on Wednesday after the state attorney general announced that no criminal charges will be filed against the police officers involved in the death of African-American woman Breonna Taylor in March.

"At this time Larynzo Johnson has been charged with two counts of assault first degree and 14 counts of wanton endangerment, all directed against police officers," Schroeder said.

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US to Conduct Orderly Transition After Presidential Election - Republican Senate Leader

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - The winner of the November presidential election in the United States will be inaugurated in an orderly transition on January 20 just as it has happened every four years since the country's inception, US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said in a statement on Thursday.

"The winner of the November 3rd election will be inaugurated on January 20th. There will be an orderly transition just as there has been every four years since 1792," McConnell said via Twitter.

McConnell's comments come after President Donald Trump a day earlier during a press conference refused to say whether he would hand over power if he loses the vote.

Asked earlier whether he would guarantee a peaceful transfer after the election, Trump responded "We're going to have to see what happens."

Trump has repeatedly claimed that widespread mail-in voting due to the coronavirus pandemic could result in significant fraud. Democrats say the claim is unfounded.

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US Special Envoy Praises Taliban for Taking Afghan Peace Process 'Very Seriously'

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - The United States views the Taliban movement as a trustworthy interlocutor who takes the ongoing intra-Afghan peace process "very seriously," US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad said on Thursday.

"Based on what I see and what I have heard, they are serious about the negotiations. They have [sent] a very powerful, senior team to the negotiations. They've prepared for it seriously," Khalilzad said during an online appearance at the United States Institute of Peace.

On February 29, the United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement that paved the way for reducing violence, gradual foreign troops withdrawal from Afghanistan and starting intra-Afghan negotiations.

Khalilzad said the United States recognizes the Taliban's ability and willingness to deliver. "When they say a ceasefire, it's largely held. When they say there will be a reduction of violence, it does happen. When they say we won't attack foreigners, I told you the record," he said.

Khalilzad noted that no US soldiers have been lost in Afghanistan since the United States reached the agreement with the Taliban.

The Special Representative said the Taliban wants a negotiated settlement as it seeks to be accepted internationally as a partner and a normal player.

The movement is wary of the Syrian scenario, where military successes of one side invited an increased foreign interference in support of another and "the war went on," Khalilzad added.

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US to Sanction Iranian Officials, Entities Today In Response to Afkari Execution - Abrams

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) – The US administration plans to announce new sanctions against Iranian officials and entities involved in the execution of 27-year-old wrestler Navid Afkari, who was accused of killing a security guard during the 2018 protests, Special Representative for Iran and Venezuela Elliott Abrams said.

"Later today, the United States will announce sanctions on several Iranian officials and entities including the judge who sentenced Navid Afkari to death," Abrams said at a US Senate hearing.

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UN Chief Calls on World Bank, IMF to Provide More Support to States Hit by Coronavirus

UNITED NATIONS, September 24 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Thursday during a Security Council meeting that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) should provide enhanced access to facilities and tools to countries impacted by the novel coronavirus pandemic.

"We need the World Bank Group on the International Monetary Fund to support member countries through enhanced access to facilities and tools," Guterres said. "Network multilateralism must extend beyond peace and security, encompassing the Bretton Woods institutions, development banks, trade alliances and more."

Guterres pointed out that the pandemic has highlighted multiple vulnerabilities worldwide, including increased humanitarian needs, and reversed decades of progress on sustainable development.

Meanwhile the international community is not keeping pace with the world as it is, Guterres added.

The UN chief said countries around the world must unite in promoting multilateral institutions that are ready to react to the range of challenges the pandemic has put forth.

"We have no choice: either we come together in global institutions that are fit for purpose or we will be crushed by deviousness and chaos," Guterres said.

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US to Provide Additional \$720M In Humanitarian Aid for Syrian Crisis - Biegun

UNITED NATIONS, September 24 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide more than \$720 million in additional humanitarian assistance to respond to the Syrian crisis inside the country and across the region, US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun said at a virtual humanitarian event held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

"I have the pleasure today to announce that the United States will provide more than \$720 million in additional humanitarian assistance for the Syria crisis response, both for Syrians inside the country and for those in desperate need across the region," Biegun said.

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US Willing to Reestablish Diplomatic Ties With Iran If Tehran Changes Behavior - Abrams

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) – The United States is willing to re-establish diplomatic relations with Iran, should Tehran choose to change its behavior, US Special Representative Elliott Abrams said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"If Iran is willing to put the needs and desires of its people ahead of its dangerous ideological ambitions, it has much to gain from negotiations. The people of the United States and Iran

should have diplomatic ties again," Abrams said. "We are willing to reestablish diplomatic relations, help bring economic prosperity, and more if Iran is ready to behave like a country rather than a cause."

The special envoy said that if this change is pursued, the sanctions regime could be ended, with the two countries moving forward on trade deals and direct flights.

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Canada Says Lukashenko 'Lacks Legitimacy' to Be Belarusian President – Foreign Minister

TORONTO, September 24 (Sputnik) – Canada does not recognize President Alexander Lukashenko as the legitimate head of state in Belarus following his inauguration a day earlier, Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne said in a statement on Thursday.

"Since the fraudulent presidential elections of August 2020, Alexander Lukashenko continues to display disdain for the people of Belarus by holding a so-called inauguration ceremony behind closed doors today. The inauguration is as illegitimate as the elections it follows. Canada considers that Alexander Lukashenko lacks the legitimacy to be the leader of Belarus," Champagne said.

A presidential inauguration is the internal affair of Belarus and the country is not obliged to inform other states about it, Lukashenko said on Thursday, adding that Minsk did not ask anyone to recognize the presidential election or the legitimacy of the president.

The Belarusian president was congratulated by the Chinese Foreign Ministry on Thursday, which said it "respects the choice of the Belarusian people" and supports the country's drive towards independence and sovereignty.

Washington and its allies in the European Union have already condemned the inauguration and do not consider Lukashenko to be the legitimate president.

On August 9, the Belarusian opposition organized protests after disputing the results of the presidential election in which incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko was reelected for a sixth term by winning 80 percent of the vote. The opposition insists that its candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, won the election.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly accused Western nations of direct interference in the situation. Moscow has also voiced its concern over the signs of foreign interference in the internal affairs of Belarus.

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US Posts 870,000 Weekly Jobless Claims For Week to Sept 19 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - Some 870,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, up slightly from the previous week, the Labor Department said on Thursday, as the US job market continued to struggle six months into the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending September 19, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 870,000," the Labor Department said in a news release. It revised claims in the previous week to September 12 to 866,000, putting the current week's rise at 4,000.

But continuous claims for the latest week showed filings from 12.58 million Americans, lower than the previous week's number of 12.75 million. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, stood at 8.4 percent, down 0.1 percent of a point from the previous week.

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

The US economy itself shrank at its fastest pace in history in the second quarter of 2020, contracting by 32.9 percent amid widespread lockdowns due to the COVID-19. While economic data has been encouraging over the past three months, recovery from the pandemic has remained spotty.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Biden Likely to Follow Trump's NATO Game Plan if Elected

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden if elected would likely continue the Trump administration's policies of strengthening NATO's military presence in Eastern Europe and pressing allies to boost defense spending, analysts told Sputnik.

SAME PATH, DIFFERENT STYLE

During a televised "town hall" meeting in the key swing state of Pennsylvania last week, Biden signaled that he would be much tougher on Russia than Trump has been and vowed to

strengthen US relations with its allies. The former vice president claimed Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to break up NATO to avoid facing a full alliance contingent.

On closer inspection, however, the national security policies Biden has supported or proposed ironically look a lot like Trump's - especially when it comes to NATO.

Trump, to be sure, has gone to great lengths to force NATO allies to increase their defense spending contributions. For example, earlier this year, he ordered the redeployment of troops from Germany to punish Berlin for underpaying alliance dues.

However Biden, just like Trump, is expected to keep pressuring allies, including Germany, when it comes to meeting NATO quotas, Politico reported on Monday, citing campaign sources.

Biden and other critics slammed Trump's decision to relocate US troops from Germany without acknowledging that almost half of the forces will be re-positioned within Europe to strengthen the alliance's eastern flank. In other words, the troops will be moved closer to Russia's borders.

In 2018, Biden in an article for Foreign Affairs also proposed boosting NATO's military capabilities in a way that does not deviate from Trump's game plan significantly. Brookings Institution scholar Michael O'Hanlon believes Biden's proposal is in line with Trump's designs.

"[Biden's proposal]... relates to some of what Trump has been doing or now plans to - strengthening the US posture in Poland, for example, and facilitating the logistics that would be needed to send US forces through Poland to the Baltic states in a crisis," O'Hanlon told Sputnik. University of California Santa Cruz Emeritus Professor of Politics, Ronnie Lipschutz, said Biden, of course, would have no choice but to act to support NATO in order to reassure America's allies.

"It's clear that diminishing it [NATO] makes the Europeans and many in DC very uncomfortable," Lipschutz told Sputnik.

Lipschutz, the author of "Constitution of Imperium," which analyzes how Washington and its allies use institutions like NATO to maintain global hegemony, said he would actually like to see Europe constitute an independent defense force to balance against the US.

Moscow, for its part, has long argued that the NATO military buildup near Russia's borders only serves to increase the chances for sparking a conflict.

This is one of the reasons why Lipschutz hopes Biden abandons the strategy to increase NATO's military capabilities.

"It would only feed the voracious appetites of the Pentagon and defense industry - and antagonize Russia - which we don't need, whatever one thinks of Russia these days," Lipschutz said.

Despite these similarities, however, Lipschutz said he would trust Biden to take a more thoughtful approach.

"I find it difficult to identify any logic or coherence in Trump's policies vis-a-vis Europe. He seems to view international politics as the same as competition with other billionaires. So, anything Biden might do would be a lot better," Lipschutz said.

US-RUSSIA OPPORTUNITIES UNDER BIDEN?

Trump has often declared that he wants to improve relations with Moscow, yet US-Russian relations have reached a low-point. Some hope, if he is elected, Biden's actions will not match his anti-Russian rhetoric on the campaign trail, because there are areas where Moscow and Washington share common interests.

Biden, as vice president, actually pushed back against the Obama administration's more hawkish policies. He opposed the Libya intervention and the surge in Afghanistan. In addition, he openly questioned the wisdom of arming extremists in Syria.

O'Hanlon said Moscow and Washington could work together towards diplomatic deals for peace on the situations in Syria and Libya among other opportunities.

"And then there's Iran policy, where Biden will likely return to the JCPOA and thus to being in lockstep with Russia, whatever that may get us," O'Hanlon said.

Although the former vice president wants to maintain US sanctions on Russia related to the Ukraine crisis, O'Hanlon doubts Biden would "rock the boat" too much.

"We have sort of reached a 'new normal' of low-grade, ongoing, and constrained hostilities in eastern Ukraine - and of course, a firm Russian hold on Crimea. There's not much reason to go looking for trouble, so to speak, unless the Russians step up the provocations," O'Hanlon added.

The think tank scholar also suggested that even more could be done, although some might claim it sounds like wishful thinking.

"Ideally, too, we'd actually try to solve the Ukraine problem with a negotiated settlement on the Donbas and a lifting of sanctions on Russia. But that seems like a moonshot at present," O'Hanlon observed.

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RPT: REVIEW - US Police, Protesters Clash in Louisville Over Breonna Taylor Announcement

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - Mass protests erupted in Louisville, Kentucky, prompting the deployment of the National Guard and federal agents, after the state Attorney General announced that the police officers involved in the killing of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman, will not face criminal charges.

Taylor was killed in her Louisville home in March when police officers executed a drug search warrant. Taylor's boyfriend allegedly 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 six times.

CLASHES

Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron announced in a press conference on Wednesday that the use of force by two police officers in Breonna Taylor's death in March was justified under state law after they were fired upon by Taylor's boyfriend.

"While there are six possible homicide charges under Kentucky law, these charges are not applicable to the facts before us because our investigation showed and the grand jury agreed that [officer Jonathan] Mattingly and [detective Myles] Cosgrove were justified in their return of deadly fire after having been fired upon by [Taylor's boyfriend] Kenneth Walker," Cameron said. Cameron said this justification bars his office from pursuing criminal charges against the police officers.

However, Cameron said a US grand jury has decided to indict former police officer Brett Hankison with three counts of wanton endangerment in the first-degree after shots he fired during the police raid of Taylor's apartment went into an apartment next door and seriously endangered the three residents inside.

US Judge Annie O'Connell issued a warrant for Hankison's arrest and his bond was set at \$15,000. If convicted on all three counts, Hankison could face up to 15 years in prison.

Moreover, Cameron pointed out that evidence shows officers knocked and announced their presence at Taylor's apartment when serving their warrant - contrary to initial reports that police officers executed a no-knock drug search warrant late at night.

Louisville Metro Police Department Chief Robert Schroeder said in a briefing after the Breonna Taylor announcement that the Kentucky National Guard and US federal agents deployed to Louisville to help local law enforcement restore order if civil unrest intensifies.

Large groups of law enforcement officers in riot gear clashed with protesters in Louisville several hours after the Breonna Taylor announcement, according to television footage from the scene. The video footage showed police officers using non-lethal weapons, like rubber bullets, and arresting several protesters.

Other video showed some protesters trying to damage at least two businesses in Louisville, but no serious damage was done. Other footage shows a woman in a U-Haul truck dropping off shields for protesters to use.

REACTIONS

US President Donald Trump said during a press conference that he intends to speak to Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear about the rioting in the city of Louisville.

Trump called the deployment of the National Guard in Louisville to quell social unrest a "positive development."

Democratic Presidential nominee Joe Biden called on enraged protesters to be peaceful.

"Do not sully her memory or her mother by engaging in any violence. It's totally inappropriate for that to happen. And she wouldn't want it nor would her mother. So I hope they do that calmly," Biden told reporters.

Black civil rights leader Jesse Jackson during a press conference in Chicago also called on protesters to refrain from violence, adding that it could help President Donald Trump's re-election.

Attorney Benjamin Crump, who is representing Breonna Taylor's family, said in a statement that the only charges announced in Taylor's case are outrageous and offensive.

"Jefferson County Grand Jury indicts former [officer] Brett Hankison with 3 counts of Wanton Endangerment in 1st Degree for bullets that went into other apartments but NOTHING for the murder of Breonna Taylor. This is outrageous and offensive," Crump said in a statement via Twitter.

US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who has been very vocal about racial injustice, told reporters that Breonna Taylor's death is not just the result of one person, but of a system, structure and department that failed the community of Louisville.

US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said the charges brought forward by the grand jury hold no one accountable for Taylor's death, adding that her family is left searching for justice.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Trump Used UN General Assembly Speech to Woo US Voters as Tougher Than Biden on China

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump used his United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) address as a campaign speech to convince voters he is tougher on China than Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, analysts told Sputnik.

TARGETING CHINA

In his speech to the annual UNGA in New York City on Tuesday, Trump blamed the Chinese government once again for the global spread of COVID-19 and called on the UN to hold China "accountable" for it.

The US leader also accused Beijing and the World Health Organization (WHO), which he said was "virtually controlled by China", of falsely declaring there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission and of transmission by asymptomatic carriers.

Independent Institute Center on Peace and Liberty Director Ivan Eland said Trump's tough comments had to be understood in the context of the upcoming US president election on November.

"Everything Trump does seems related to his re-election efforts, so he is bashing China - after he praised China during the first part of his administration - because he wants to be tougher on China than Joe Biden," Eland told Sputnik

Eland said Trump thinks, probably erroneously - unless a hot war breaks out soon - that it is a substantial electoral advantage.

Trump and Biden have been dueling on who is tougher on China. Many American workers and businesses see China's rise as coming at their expense. In his speech to the Democratic National Convention in August, Biden said he would ensure that the United States does not rely on China supply chains.

Moreover, last week Democrats rolled out a \$350 billion package to "counter the rise of China" claiming Trump has failed to do so.

GLOBAL BELLIGERENCE

Trump's speech also included aggressive rhetoric against a number of other countries such as Iran and Venezuela.

University of Pittsburgh Professor of International Affairs Michael Brenner pointed out that Trump's UN speech showcased the hunger for confrontation that drives US foreign policy for both Democrats and Republicans.

"What we should keep foremost in mind is the belligerence that has come to mark American foreign policy," he said.

Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo are uninhibited about insult and accusation and are acting within the political context of the upcoming presidential elections in mind, Brenner acknowledged.

"The readiness to impose our will on others, justified by little more than undocumented assertion and justified in terms of narrow US national interest, is shared by a large majority of the foreign policy establishment," he cautioned.

Reckless, confrontational, go-it-alone policies enjoyed virtually unanimous, bipartisan support in Congress on a wide variety of issues, Brenner said.

"I refer to Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and of course Israel. On none of the associated issues is there a substantive debate," he said.

This common frame of reference, Brenner added, "is untenable as the intellectual foundation for a world order that conforms to global realities." The arrogant style will make it all the harder to make pragmatic adjustments on a range of issues such as the nuclear treaty with Iran, he said.

"The domestic [American] public has been so conditioned to view the world in these hostile terms as to raise the obstacles to any pragmatic initiative a Biden administration might wish to take [towards] Iran, Russia, China, [and] Venezuela," Brenner concluded.

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RPT - Alaska's Sitka to Relocate Baranov Statue to Museum by End of October - Director

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - Authorities of the Alaskan city of Sitka will move the statue of the first Russian America Governor, Alexander Baranov, from downtown to a local history museum by the end of October, the museum's Executive Director Hal Spackman told Sputnik.

"I expect the statue to be re-located to its permanent home in the museum before the end of October," Spackman said Wednesday.

In July, the city assembly adopted a resolution to relocate the Baranov statue to the Sitka Historical Society Museum, after a group of local activists urged legislators to remove it, citing mistreatment of indigenous people. In 1799, Baranov founded Sitka - called at that time Novo-Archangelsk - as the capital of the Russian colonies in North America.

"We are currently in the process of working with City of Sitka maintenance staff to remove the statue from the rock to which it is affixed and transport it to our museum, which is less than 50 yards from its present location," Spackman said.

A local carpenter will build an appropriate and solid foundation for the statue, he added.

The Russian Cultural Center in Alaska offered assistance with the process of moving and providing information about Baranov, but nothing specific has been discussed so far, the museum's director noted.

"Our organization will welcome any help outside entities can offer," Spackman said.

In July, the Russian Community Council of the USA (RCC), which previously organized a petition and collected almost 6,000 signatures against removing the statue, sent a letter to the museum asking that it cooperate with the Russian diaspora in providing comprehensive information about Baranov to visitors.

Statues of several historical figures associated with racism have been removed, toppled or defaced across the United States amid nationwide protests fueled by multiple police-involved killings of African

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RPT - State Dept on Inauguration in Belarus: US Can Not Consider Lukashenko Legitimate President

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - The United States can not consider Alexander Lukashenko to be a legitimately elected president of Belarus despite the inauguration for his sixth term in office, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"The elections on August 9 were neither free nor fair. The announced results were fraudulent and did not convey legitimacy," the spokesperson said on Wednesday. "The United States cannot consider Alexander Lukashenko the legitimately elected leader of Belarus."

Earlier on Wednesday, Lukashenko, whose victory in the August election is being contested by the country's opposition, was reported to have been sworn in office in a closed ceremony.

The State Department spokesperson said the path forward in Belarus should be marked by a national dialogue leading to the Belarusian people choosing their leaders in a free and fair election under independent observation.

"The release of those unjustly detained and an end of repression against peacefully protesting citizens is a first step toward genuine national dialogue," the spokesperson said.

While the inauguration ceremony was not publicly announced in advance, several hundred people were present at the event at the Palace of Independence, including officials, lawmakers, athletes and media representatives.

Lukashenko secured his sixth term in office having won 80.1 percent of the votes in the August 9 election. However, the Belarusian opposition has rejected the result, triggering nationwide protests that are still ongoing.

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REVIEW - US Police, Protesters Clash in Louisville Over Breonna Taylor Announcement

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Canada's Bloc Quebecois Issues Ultimatum to Trudeau That Could Set Stage for Election

TORONTO, September 24 (Sputnik) - Canada's Bloc Quebecois will not support the Trudeau government's COVID-19 recovery plan unless the Prime Minister increases health transfers to the province within the week, Party leader Yves-Francois Blanchet said in a televised address to the nation.

Earlier in the day, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau outlined his vision for the impending economic recovery in a Throne Speech delivered on his behalf. A vote of non-confidence from all of the major opposition parties would bring down the incumbent Liberal government and trigger an election.

"Mr. Trudeau has one week to provide unconditional transfers to Quebec for healthcare, otherwise the Bloc Quebecois will vote against this Throne Speech," Blanchet said on Wednesday.

Officials from Quebec, which maintains "exclusive responsibility" over healthcare, has argued that the federal government has let down the province amid the pandemic. Quebec remains the hardest-hit Canadian province with 69,088 COVID-19 infections and 5,809 virus-related fatalities.

The official opposition Conservative Party has already said that it will not support the throne speech.

Should Trudeau's plan be rejected by the Bloc Quebecois, the fate of the current government would rest in the hands of the New Democrat Party (NDP). NDP leader Jagmeet Singh said that his party will take their time in scrutinizing the throne speech, adding that his decision is dependent on specific legislative proposals from the governing Liberals.

The Speech from the Throne is delivered by Her Majesty the Queen's representative in Canada, the Governor-General, on behalf of the prime minister at the commencement of a new parliamentary session following the suspension of proceedings outlining the government's vision for the country.

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Trump Calls FDA Plan to Tighten Guidelines for COVID-19 Vaccine Approval 'Political Move'

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said in a press briefing that his administration may or may not approve a proposal from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that would tighten guidelines for approving a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccine.

On Tuesday, the Washington Post reported that the FDA would consider stricter guidelines to approve a vaccine in order to improve transparency and public trust.

"That has to be approved by the White House, we may or may not approve it," Trump said on Wednesday. "That sounds like a political move."

Many Democrats have accused Trump of trying to fast-track the vaccine approval process in order to get one delivered ahead of the November reelection. Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden has recently urged the regulator agency to maintain transparency and independence. Trump has promised that 100 million doses of a vaccine will be distributed throughout the United States by the end of the year. He said a vaccine could be available for distribution before the presidential election on November 3.

The United States has reported nearly 7 million cases of COVID-19 and more than 201,000 deaths caused by the disease as of Wednesday evening, according to the Johns Hopkins University count.

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Trudeau Says Second Wave of COVID-19 'Already Underway' in Canada

TORONTO, September 24 (Sputnik) - Canada is already experiencing a second wave of the novel coronavirus pandemic, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a televised address to the nation.

"The second wave isn't just starting, it's already underway," Trudeau said on Wednesday.

Canada's public health experts are sounding the alarm as the number of COVID-19 infections surpassed 147,000 on Wednesday.

Since the beginning of September, Canadian authorities have recorded nearly 20,000 new infections, including more than 7,500 in the last week alone, according to government data.

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US Banking Giant JPMorgan Chase Agrees to Pay \$1Bln Over Trade Rigging Charges - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - JPMorgan Chase is close to finalizing an agreement with US federal prosecutors to pay \$1 billion to settle criminal charges over alleged trade rigging, the *Wall Street Journal* reported.

The deal came after probes into whether the bank manipulated prices for metals and Treasury securities, the report said on Wednesday, citing people familiar with the matter.

The agreement would not put restrictions on the bank's operations, according to the report.

The Justice Department has been cracking down on an illicit practice known as "spoofing," which involves deceitful trading of derivatives, the report added.

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Trump Nominates National Security Council Veteran Souza for Intelligence Inspector General

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump has decided to nominate National Security Council (NSC) veteran official Allen Robert Souza as the Intelligence Community's next Inspector-General, the White House said in a press release.

"Today, President Donald J. Trump announced his intent to nominate the following individual to a key position in his Administration: Allen Robert Souza, of North Carolina, to be Inspector General of the Intelligence Community," the release said on Wednesday.

Souza is currently the Principal Deputy Senior Director for Intelligence Programs at the NSC where he helps coordinate intelligence collection and covert action programs as well as advises senior White House and NSC officials, the release said.

Souza previously served as Minority Staff Director and General Counsel of the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee and drafted critical pieces of national security legislation signed into law by the US president, the release added.

Souza was also previously a lawyer at the National Security Agency (NSA), where he provided legal advice and oversight on signals intelligence operations conducted pursuant to Executive Order 12333 and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act and provided legal support to NSA's Office of Congressional Affairs, according to the release.

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Trump Says States Will Get \$200Mln to Prepare for Vaccine Distribution to High-Risk People

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump in a press briefing said his administration is providing \$200 million to all US states to prepare for the distribution of a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccine to high-risk people as soon as it is available.

"Today my administration announced that we are awarding \$200 million of CARES Act funding to all 50 states to prepare to distribute the vaccine to high-risk residents," Trump said on Wednesday.

Trump also said a fourth vaccine candidate has entered the final phase of clinical trials in the United States.

Trump has promised that 100 million doses of a vaccine will be distributed throughout the United States by the end of the year. He said a vaccine could be available for distribution as early as mid-October.

The United States has reported nearly 7 million cases of COVID-19 and more than 201,000 deaths caused by the disease as of Wednesday evening, according to the Johns Hopkins University count.

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Trump Says Will Speak to Kentucky Governor Beshear About Louisville Riots

WASHINGTON, September 24 - President Donald Trump said during a press conference that he intends to speak to Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear about the rioting in the city of Louisville.

Trump called the deployment of the National Guard in Louisville to quell social unrest a "positive development."

The rioting broke out after a Kentucky grand jury failed to indict two police officers for the killing of Brianna Taylor during a bungled drug raid.

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US Justice Dept. Drafts Bill to Limit Social Media Discretion to Police User Content

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice said in a statement that it has submitted to Congress a draft legislation that may put constraints on popular social media platforms' discretion to police user content.

Acting at the direction of President Donald Trump, the Justice Department seeks to alter Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 that gives immunity to online platforms from civil liability for third-party content and its removal.

"For too long Section 230 has provided a shield for online platforms to operate with impunity," Attorney General William Barr said in the statement on Wednesday. "We therefore urge Congress to make these necessary reforms to Section 230 and begin to hold online platforms accountable both when they unlawfully censor speech and when they knowingly facilitate criminal activity online."

The Justice Department said its initiative replaces vague terms that may be used to shield arbitrary content moderation decisions. The initiative also proposes more specific language for greater guidance to social media platforms, users and courts, with a second category of amendments to incentivize platforms to address the growing amount of illicit content online. "Platforms that purposely solicit and facilitate harmful criminal activity... should not receive the benefit of this immunity. Nor should a platform receive blanket immunity for continuing to host known criminal content on its services, despite repeated pleas from victims to take action," the Justice Department said.

Trump signed an executive order calling for a series of legislative and legal actions to prevent online censorship after Twitter applied a fact-checking label to his content alleging that mail-in ballots are a source of voter fraud as well as otherwise censored his and his sons' tweets.

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US Civil Rights Leader Jesse Jackson Urges Louisville Protesters to Refrain From Violence

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - Black civil rights leader Jesse Jackson during a press conference called on protesters enraged that no police officers were charged in Breonna Taylor's killing to refrain from violence, adding that it could help President Donald Trump's re-election.

"We must be smart enough not to turn our anguish and anger into self-destruction, and give Trump a commercial," Jackson said on Wednesday.

Trump was asked what his message was to those who feel injustice in Taylor's case and he responded "I don't know enough about it."

Video footage from Louisville following the Breonna Taylor announcement showed police in riot gear clash with protesters. Police officers can be seen or heard firing rubber bullets at protesters while at least ten protesters are arrested. Other video shows militia groups patrolling downtown Louisville.

Earlier on Wednesday, Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron announced that the use of force by two police officers in Taylor's death in March was justified under state law after they were fired upon by Taylor's boyfriend. Cameron said this justification bars them from pursuing charges in Taylor's death.

Taylor was killed in her Louisville home in March when police officers executed a drug search warrant. Taylor's boyfriend allegedly 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 six times.

However, a grand jury charged one of the police officers involved in the incident, Detective Brett Hankison, with three counts of wanton endangerment in the first-degree after shots he fired during the police raid of Taylor's apartment went into an apartment next door and seriously endangered the three residents inside.

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UN, UK to Host Global Climate Summit on December 12 - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, September 24 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson will co-host a major global event on the Paris Climate Agreement anniversary on December 12, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

"The Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson will co-host a landmark global event convening global leaders on December 12 this year to rally much greater climate action and ambition," Dujarric said on Wednesday.

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Vucic Says in UN General Assembly Speech Serbia Committed to Finding Compromise on Kosovo

UNITED NATIONS, September 24 (Sputnik) - Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said in remarks to the UN General Assembly that his country is committed to finding a compromise solution on Kosovo.

"The Republic of Serbia remains committed to finding compromise solution for the issue of Kosovo and to building a common future with politics of peace and cooperation," Vucic said on Wednesday.

Vucic emphasized that the recently US-brokered agreement on economic normalization between Serbia and Kosovo is a "big step" toward finding a solution.

In mid-September, US President Donald Trump hosted talks between the Serbian leader and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti who signed the deal to normalize economic ties.

Historically a province of Serbia, Kosovo was subjected to terrorist attacks and then an armed uprising led by the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army terror group. The conflict triggered an unauthorized NATO military campaign against Serbia and Montenegro - then comprising SR Yugoslavia - paving the way for Albanians in Kosovo to declare independence in 2008.

Serbia has not recognized Kosovo's independence and launched a campaign to convince other countries not to recognize it either or recall their recognition.

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Trudeau in Throne Speech Vows to Add 1Mln Jobs, Return Employment to Pre-Pandemic Levels

TORONTO, September 24 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will launch a program to add one million jobs to the economy, returning employment levels back to pre-pandemic levels, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a speech delivered on his behalf.

An election could be triggered should the speech not receive a vote of confidence from the any of the major opposition parties.

"To help make that happen, the Government will launch a campaign to create over one million jobs, restoring employment to previous levels," Canadian Governor-General Julie Payette said on Wednesday on behalf of Trudeau.

The government plans to achieve this through direct investment in the social sector, infrastructure and skills training programs as well as a pledge to extend the Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) until next summer.

The official opposition has said that it will not support the throne speech.

"We've looked at this speech from the throne and Conservatives cannot support it," Deputy Leader of the Conservative Party Candice Bergen said in response to the speech. "It is another speech that is full of Liberal buzzwords and grand gestures with very little to no follow up plan." Trudeau's plan will now require support from either the Bloc Quebecois or the New Democrat Party (NDP), both of whom have indicated their displeasure with the speech, for a federal election to be averted.

The Speech from the Throne is delivered by Her Majesty the Queen's representative in Canada, the Governor-General, on behalf of the prime minister at the commencement of a new parliamentary session following the suspension of proceedings outlining the government's vision for the country.

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ANALYSIS - Trump Used UN General Assembly Speech to Woo US Voters as Tougher Than Biden on China

WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump used his United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) address as a campaign speech to convince voters he is tougher on China than Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, analysts told Sputnik.

TARGETING CHINA

In his speech to the annual UNGA in New York City on Tuesday, Trump blamed the Chinese government once again for the global spread of COVID-19 and called on the UN to hold China "accountable" for it.

The US leader also accused Beijing and the World Health Organization (WHO), which he said was "virtually controlled by China", of falsely declaring there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission and of transmission by asymptomatic carriers.

Independent Institute Center on Peace and Liberty Director Ivan Eland said Trump's tough comments had to be understood in the context of the upcoming US president election on November.

"Everything Trump does seems related to his re-election efforts, so he is bashing China - after he praised China during the first part of his administration - because he wants to be tougher on China than Joe Biden," Eland told Sputnik

Eland said Trump thinks, probably erroneously - unless a hot war breaks out soon - that it is a substantial electoral advantage.

Trump and Biden have been dueling on who is tougher on China. Many American workers and businesses see China's rise as coming at their expense. In his speech to the Democratic National Convention in August, Biden said he would ensure that the United States does not rely on China supply chains.

Moreover, last week Democrats rolled out a \$350 billion package to "counter the rise of China" claiming Trump has failed to do so.

GLOBAL BELLIGERENCE

Trump's speech also included aggressive rhetoric against a number of other countries such as Iran and Venezuela.

University of Pittsburgh Professor of International Affairs Michael Brenner pointed out that Trump's UN speech showcased the hunger for confrontation that drives US foreign policy for both Democrats and Republicans.

"What we should keep foremost in mind is the belligerence that has come to mark American foreign policy," he said.

Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo are uninhibited about insult and accusation and are acting within the political context of the upcoming presidential elections in mind, Brenner acknowledged.

"The readiness to impose our will on others, justified by little more than undocumented assertion and justified in terms of narrow US national interest, is shared by a large majority of the foreign policy establishment," he cautioned.

Reckless, confrontational, go-it-alone policies enjoyed virtually unanimous, bipartisan support in Congress on a wide variety of issues, Brenner said.

"I refer to Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and of course Israel. On none of the associated issues is there a substantive debate," he said.

This common frame of reference, Brenner added, "is untenable as the intellectual foundation for a world order that conforms to global realities." The arrogant style will make it all the harder to make pragmatic adjustments on a range of issues such as the nuclear treaty with Iran, he said.

"The domestic [American] public has been so conditioned to view the world in these hostile terms as to raise the obstacles to any pragmatic initiative a Biden administration might wish to take [towards] Iran, Russia, China, [and] Venezuela," Brenner concluded.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, September 24 (Sputnik)

US SANCTIONS AGAINST CUBA

* US President Donald Trump announced on Wednesday new sanctions against Cuba, including introducing a ban for Americans on using hotels owned by the island nation's leaders and close relatives.

* The United States has added 433 hotels in Cuba to its Prohibited Accommodations list, restricting US citizens from using the listed facilities, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Carrie Filipetti told reporters.

UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

* Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud said in his first address at the 75th UN General Assembly that the international community needs to take a firm international stance on Iran to ensure a comprehensive solution to Tehran's attempt to possess weapons of mass destruction.

* The only way to achieve a sustainable defeat of terrorism is to dry up its financing and combat corruption, Iraqi President Barham Salih said.

* Lebanese President Michel Aoun on Wednesday thanked all world leaders who pledged their support following the August explosion in the port of Beirut in his speech to the 75th United Nations General Assembly.

US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The United States has imposed sanctions on eight individuals - Russian citizens or of Russian descent - and seven entities in Russia, Finland and the Central African Republic over alleged foreign interference and sanctions evasion, the US Treasury announced in a statement on Wednesday.

SITUATION IN BELARUS

* More than ten people were detained in Minsk for participating in an unauthorized rally, the city's police spokeswoman, Natalya Ganusevich, told Sputnik.

* German Chancellor Angela Merkel is unlikely to congratulate Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on his inauguration, the German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said.

* The Belarusian opposition coordination council demands a new presidential election and calls for indefinite protests, Pavel Latushko, a member of the council's presidium, said.

RUSSIAN MILITARY SHIP COLLIDES WITH DANISH VESSEL

* A Danish civilian refrigerator vessel Ice Rose and a Russian frigate collided in the Oresund strait separating Denmark and Sweden, the Danish military said on Wednesday.

* There were no injuries on the Russian Kazanets ship after it collided with Ice Rose in the Oresund strait, the press service of the Baltic Fleet said.

* The Swedish Maritime Authority told Sputnik that the Russian military ship that collided with Ice Rose did not use the automatic identification system, which allows ships to track vessels close to them.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

* Russian President Vladimir Putin extended coronavirus-related measures for foreigners and stateless persons in Russia until December 15, according to a presidential decree published on the country's legal information portal.

* Putin announced that Russia will soon register its second vaccine against COVID-19,.

* Poland's Biomed Lublin said it had developed an effective medication for the treatment of the novel coronavirus.