

03/18/21 Thursday

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US Baby Born With COVID-19 Antibodies After Mother Vaccinated During Pregnancy
by [Mary F.](#)

Scientists are scrambling to learn more SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, as the global death toll climbs to almost 3 million. Current research shows that those who recover from COVID-19 could have immunity to the virus for at least 8 months post-infection.

A baby born in Florida has become the first in the world to be born with COVID-19 antibodies after her mom, a frontline health worker, was administered the Moderna vaccine while she was 36 weeks pregnant. According to [WPBF](#), the baby girl was born in late January in Palm Beach County.

“To our knowledge, this was the first in the world that was reported of a baby being born with antibodies after a vaccination,” Dr. Paul Gilbert told the outlet.

The baby was born three weeks after her mom received the COVID-19 vaccine.

“We tested the baby’s cord to see if the antibodies in the mother passed to the baby which is something, we see happen with other vaccines given during pregnancy,” Gilbert said.

This is promising news that could protect children from COVID-19, Rudnick pointed out.

“This is one small case in what will be thousands and thousands of babies born to mothers who have been vaccinated [in] the next several months,” Rudnick said.

A study conducted in Israel has also shown that vaccinated pregnant women could pass immunity to their babies. Researchers at Jerusalem’s Hadassah-University Medical Center detected antibodies in all 20 women and their babies through placental transfer after the women received both doses of the Pfizer vaccine during their third trimester of pregnancy.

The study did not specify whether the babies were in utero when the blood samples were taken to determine immunity.

“Our findings highlight that vaccination of pregnant women may provide maternal and neonatal protection from SARS-CoV-2 infection,” the researchers wrote, although they did add that additional research would need to be conducted due to the study’s small sample size. The study has also yet to be peer-reviewed.

Last month, Pfizer and BioNTech [said](#) they had launched a 4,000-volunteer international study to evaluate the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine in pregnant women.

Currently, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that pregnant women may choose to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

“Getting vaccinated is a personal choice. Any of the currently authorized COVID-19 vaccines can be offered to people who are pregnant or breastfeeding. If you have questions about getting vaccinated, a conversation with your healthcare provider might help, but is not required,” the CDC [notes](#) on its website.

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Low-Dose Aspirin Can Reduce the Risk of Severe Illness or Mortality in COVID Patients - Study by [Mary F.](#)

Aspirin is a widely used over-the-counter medication that is commonly used to treat pain, fever, headache and inflammation. The non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug can also reduce the risk of heart attacks, since it prevents blood clots.

Low-dose aspirin may protect the lungs and reduce the risk of severe illness and death for COVID-19 patients, a team of researchers at George Washington University said in a study recently published in the journal *Anesthesia & Analgesia*.

The [study](#) included 412 patients who were admitted to US hospitals between March and July 2020.

By evaluating the patients' records, researchers found that aspirin use was linked to a 44% reduction in mechanical ventilation, a 43% reduction in ICU admission and a 47% reduction for in-hospital death.

"As we learned about the connection between blood clots and COVID-19, we knew that aspirin - used to prevent stroke and heart attack - could be important for COVID-19 patients," [said](#) Dr. Jonathan Chow, who was involved in the study.

This is not the first study to draw a link between aspirin and good health outcomes with COVID-19.

A [study](#) published in the journal *PLOS One*, which evaluated more than 30,000 US veterans with COVID-19, found that those who had already been taking aspirin had half the risk of mortality as those not taking daily aspirin.

"There is growing evidence that thrombotic and inflammatory pathways contribute to the severity of COVID-19. Common medications such as aspirin, that mitigate these pathways, may decrease COVID-19 mortality," the study notes.

The use of aspirin to reduce the risk of COVID-19 mortality is promising because the drug is inexpensive, especially when compared to other existing COVID-19 treatments like Remdesivir or Regeneron's antibody cocktail.

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Thailand Braces for Influx in Refugees From Myanmar Following Military Coup by [Mary F.](#)

A coup d'état in Myanmar occurred last month when democratically elected members of Myanmar's ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), were toppled by Myanmar's armed forces, the Tatmadaw. Following the coup, demonstrators poured into the streets to protest the military rule.

Officials in Thailand are preparing for a surge in refugees from Myanmar as hundreds have fled the country since last month's military coup to seek refuge in regions controlled by ethnic militias on the Thai border, [Reuters reported](#). Thai authorities have already established areas to shelter more than 43,000 people in the Mae Sot district in western Thailand that shares a border with Myanmar to the west.

According to Thai army colonel Prasan Henprasert, border patrols have also been increased to prepare for the influx of refugees.

"If there are clashes, then we have to assess the situation and have areas prepared," he said.

"Based on our experience, many people may cross and go back when the situation is safer because they have their homes on the other side."

An official from the Karen National Union (KNU), a political organization with an army that claims to represent the Karen people of Myanmar, said that a thousand people were sheltering inside KNU-controlled territory.

"Hundreds of people are now in our area," Padoh Saw Taw Nee, the KNU's head of foreign affairs, said in an interview, Reuters reported.

"Some are strike leaders, some are involved in CDM (civil disobedience), government staff ... deserters of police and military and then also some MPs [members of parliament] and doctors," he added, also noting that a smaller number of people are seeking shelter north on the border with Shan state, which is controlled by a separate ethnic militia

There are more than two dozen ethnic militia in Myanmar's borderlands. Many of those armed groups, including the KNU, have censured the coup.

"We strongly support [the] CDM movement and people's demonstration," Padoh Saw Taw Nee said.

Since the unrest first broke out, at least 217 people in opposition to the coup have been killed by Myanmar's security forces, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a civil rights group in Myanmar, [reported](#) on Thursday. As of March 17, more than 2,000 people have also been arrested, charged or sentenced.

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Video: NASA Fires Off New Rocket Engine for Lifting Mars Spacecraft in Eight-Minute Burn Test by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US space agency NASA conducted a milestone test on Thursday when it fired off the four mighty engines that will soon lift its Space Launch System into orbit in a realistic eight-minute burn.

The "hot fire test," as it was called, was [the eighth test](#) of the engine, but the first one to fire for the full eight-minute duration of a real rocket liftoff. To conduct the test, NASA loaded 733,000 gallons of super-cold rocket fuel into the engine's fuel tanks, although the engine remained fastened to a test pad at Stennis Space Center in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.

The eight-minute burn produced a huge plume of smoke behind a deafening roar, but encountered no visible problems during the test. An attempt at the test in January was

interrupted by a problem that forced engineers to cut the engines off after just one minute of burn.

The RS-25 engines are not new - three of them lifted the Space Shuttle into orbit for decades - but the SLS, a super-heavy lift vehicle intended to ferry both humans and cargo into space, uses four of the huge engines, sufficient to deliver 1.6 million pounds of thrust.

That's the kind of power needed to launch the Orion spacecraft for the [Artemis missions](#), which aim to return humans to the moon and prepare for a manned trip to Mars.

"All the data that we've looked at, and we've got a lot more to look at, but everything that we've seen in the test today looked nominal," SLS program manager John Honeycutt said in a press conference after the test. "So I would say that the core stage got an A-plus today."

NASA Acting Administrator Steve Jurczyk told reporters the agency was "looking for opportunities this year" to launch Artemis I, an unmanned test flight of SLS, Orion, and a series of cubesats, but he noted that unexpected problems could still arise once the core stage arrives as the launch site, which has never been configured for an SLS launch before.

However, the SLS and Orion have competition from a private launch firm, SpaceX, which [lifted four astronauts](#) to the International Space Station in November in its Crew Dragon spacecraft.

SpaceX is also currently developing the Starship rocket, a huge reusable space vehicle that will dwarf the SLS once mounted atop a booster rocket, but which the company has not yet managed to land [without blowing up](#).

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Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Invites Russia's Lavrov to Beijing After Alaska Summit
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In the face of mutual pressure from the United States, Russia and China have grown increasingly close in recent years, although both nations continue to strictly adhere to the principles of non-alignment.

The Chinese Foreign [Ministry announced Thursday](#) that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will visit China next week, just days after Chinese diplomats' first summit with representatives of the administration of US President Joe Biden.

According to the release, Lavrov's visit will be at the request of Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who is [presently in Anchorage](#), Alaska, alongside the Communist Party of China's foreign policy chief, Yang Jiechi, for a 2+2 summit with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan.

The March 18-19 summit is being held at the invitation of the United States, but so far, Washington diplomats have postured against the idea of the meeting opening a new dialogue. The State Department has said its primary concerns at the conference are [pressuring China](#) on Xinjiang, the South China Sea, and the origins of COVID-19. Still, Chinese leaders have maintained they believe [continued dialogue](#) between the two world powers can only be a good thing.

Wang's meeting with Lavrov will be on March 22 and 23. That will be several days after the Alaska summit, which will likely be the focus. It will also be the first time the two chief diplomats have met since Biden took office in January, signaling a potential shift away from the policies of his predecessors, US President Donald Trump, who amplified US hostility to both nations. Early in Trump's presidency, the White House and Pentagon laid out a decisive shift in US military strategy away from the War on Terror and toward "inter-state strategic competition" with Russia and China. Biden's policy thus far seems to deviate from that approach very little, with his administration implementing a slew of new sanctions on both nations, as well as labeling them human rights violators.

China, Russia Bear 'Important Responsibility'

Zhang Hanhui, the Chinese ambassador to Moscow, [told Interfax earlier](#) this month that as the world's two largest countries, China and Russia "have a wide range of common interests in maintaining peace and stability around the world and in promoting global development and prosperity, and they bear a particularly important responsibility,"

"We are ready to maintain interaction with the Russian side in the sphere of relations between our countries and the United States and to defend even better the strategic interests and development interests of the two countries," Zhang said. He added that Sino-Russian military-technical cooperation "embodies the spirit of strategic mutual trust and strategic interaction" and has helped promote regional stability.

Zhang also encouraged Washington, on the 50th anniversary of the "Ping Pong Diplomacy" that helped pave the way to normalization of relations between China and the US, to correct its past mistakes and "learn to coexist peacefully with countries with different histories, cultures and systems."

Indeed, a similar burial of the hatchet has already taken place between Russia and China, which were once bitter enemies for much of the mid-20th century despite both being socialist states at the time. While the Soviet Union is gone and Russia is no longer run by a dictatorship of the proletariat, the two powers have nonetheless founded a "[comprehensive strategic partnership](#)" that, while not a formal alliance, entails a great degree of political, military, economic, and scientific cooperation.

The two nations also cooperate on economic ventures including the Eurasian Economic Union, Belt and Road Initiative, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, all of which major international framework meetings are scheduled for this year, according to the [South China Morning Post](#).

However, it isn't just China that's conferring with its friends in conjunction with the Alaska summit: Blinken arrived in the northerly US state fresh from meetings with leaders in South Korea and Japan alongside US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. Austin will, in turn, [accompany Biden](#) on a tour of US partners in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, including the other three members of [the "Quad" group](#) - Japan, Australia, and India. Although also not an explicit alliance, it is broadly understood as an anti-China pact, and each nation has had [major diplomatic quarrels](#) with Beijing in recent years.

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UN Warns Poorest Countries to Suffer Most From 'Misguided Return to Austerity' After COVID-19
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A new report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has warned that, while economic projections have been revised upwards for 2021, there remains a severe risk of the economic chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic persisting in the world's poorest countries for years to come.

"The brunt of the hit to the global economy is being felt in developing countries with limited fiscal space, tightening balance of payments constraints and inadequate international support," [UNCTAD warned](#) on Thursday. "Without a change of course, the new normal for many will be an unbalanced recovery, vulnerability to further shocks and persistent economic insecurity." The report highlights the tremendous damage done to the global economy by the lockdowns implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which interrupted both production as well as trade as workers stayed home or went to work only intermittently and inter-state travel was frustrated by heavy restrictions.

While a number of factors have led to a recent hike in global economic growth this year from 4.3% to 4.7%, including the [\\$1.9 trillion fiscal stimulus](#) passed by the United States earlier this month, even those new projections will leave a 10 trillion dollar hole in the global economy by the end of the year. That is also still slower than the pre-pandemic annual growth level of 5%, the report notes, impacting projections for the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, among other programs.

However, a far greater danger lies in the potential early abandonment of public spending initiatives in the developed world sparked by the pandemic, which the report notes have an exacerbated effect on the global economy compared to those in the rest of the world.

"A misguided return to austerity after a deep and destructive recession is the main risk to our global outlook, especially in the context of fractured labour markets and deregulated financial markets," the report notes. "Together with the erosion of states' institutional capacity and policy space, these trends undermine the resilience of the global economy to all shocks."

"Austerity undermines resilience and fiscal space," it continues. "In the aftermath of the great financial crisis, fiscal measures (especially cash transfers) have assumed a prominent role in relief packages alongside financial measures (loans, guarantees, etc). But the effort has been unevenly distributed among countries, even within the group of developed economies. For heavily indebted developing countries multilateral debt relief was a step in the right direction but was negligible in scale."

The report faults the European Union for "replicating the imbalances behind the slowdown in growth that was already apparent prior to COVID-19," particularly commitment to an export-led recovery over sufficiently strong fiscal expansion. It also strongly criticizes the United States for building a post-2008 recovery on an economic bed of sand, including consumption-driven growth dependent on rising household debt.

"Loose monetary policy has certainly helped the recovery in consumption spending, but without a strong push in government spending, including a strong public investment drive, and measures to raise the share of labour in total income, its impact on private investment spending remains uncertain, particularly under the threat of rising corporate bankruptcies which will

increase as monetary policy is tempered. The current stimulus package contains large cash transfers but little direct spending on consumption and investment, which would offer the safest route to aggregate demand expansion and a green transition,” UNCTAD wrote.

By contrast, UNCTAD notes that “China’s ongoing efforts to turn to domestic consumer demand and increased public spending on social services will be key to moving from a robust recovery to a more balanced and transformative growth path.”

According to a new study published by [Pew Research Center](#) on Thursday, the pandemic has crushed the middle class worldwide, with the hardest-hit areas being South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific. India was hit the hardest of all, with 32 million people sliding from middle to low-income. In China, about 10 million people fell from middle to lower income, although the report notes that because the Chinese government dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic so swiftly and effectively that its society was [able to reopen](#) after just a couple of months, the country was spared an economic contraction that would have impoverished tens of millions more.

Earlier this month, China’s National People’s Congress convened its [annual legislative session](#) and verified the economic plans for beginning the country’s 14th Five-Year Plan drawn up the previous November. The plans project economic growth “above 6%” this year as well as creating 11 million new urban jobs, keeping consumer price indices at 3% and the urban unemployment rate at 5.5%, and reaching a grain output of more than 650 million metric tons. The plans also includes a number of “targeted support” programs to shore up the economy from the ravages of the previous year, including a 30% increase in bank loans to small businesses, the creation of a \$62 billion loan plan to support “emerging technologies” and an Integrated Circuit Industry Investment Fund to support chipmakers targeted by US sanctions.

Another contributing factor is the delayed rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in the Third World. While the United States has [bought nearly twice](#) the number of vaccines as it has people, Washington, alongside London and Bern, have also led the charge in [opposing a waiver](#) to Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS), the World Trade Organization’s patent cornerstone that blocks production of generic versions of medicines.

“The delay in economic recovery and further damage to overstretched health systems in the developing world will be devastating but prolonging the pandemic anywhere will have consequences everywhere,” UNCTAD said, noting that a recent study has found “this will ultimately have the gravest impacts on advanced economies.”

By contrast, China has [negotiated for Egypt](#) to become a “global logistics hub” for distributing its Sinopharm vaccine, building a factory there, as well as potentially another in Morocco. It has also launched a [vast distribution campaign](#) across some of the world’s poorest countries, including much of Africa.

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US to Export Millions of AstraZeneca Vaccines to Canada, Mexico, Despite Safety Concerns by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Wednesday, the World Health Organization highlighted that it was in "regular contact with European Medicines Agency and regulators around the world" and acknowledged many

countries have "temporarily suspended" use of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine due to reports of blood clotting in patients injected with the vaccine.

Citing an unnamed White House official, the [Associated Press](#) confirmed Thursday that US President Joe Biden's administration is finalizing a plan to export a total of four million doses of the controversial AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to the US' next-door neighbors.

Under the current plan, which would be Washington's first COVID-19 vaccine export, Mexico would be provided 2.5 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, and Canada would receive the other 1.5 million doses.

The White House official noted the exported vaccines would be a "loan." It's unclear what repayment will look like.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, as well as Mexico's secretary of relations, confirmed the report Thursday.

"I can confirm that we have 7 million releasable doses available of AstraZeneca," Psaki told reporters during a press briefing. "2.5 million of those, we are working to finalize plans to lend those to Mexico and 1.5 million to Canada."

According to the President's remarks on Tuesday, additional countries may receive the US surplus of COVID-19 vaccines.

"We're talking with several countries already," Biden told reporters. "I'll let you know that very shortly."

News of these expected exports comes alongside reports of blood clots being found in patients who received the AstraZeneca jab. While the US has yet to authorize the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use, both Canada and Mexico have approved its rollout. A top US health official [told Reuters](#) that the AstraZeneca vaccine could be authorized by US regulators in a month.

Martha Delgado, Mexico's deputy foreign minister for multilateral affairs, told the outlet last week that the Mexican government held diplomatic discussions with the US following Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's March 1 conversation with Biden, and specifically requested AstraZeneca [COVID-19 vaccines](#).

"The possibility exists of being able to have access to some AstraZeneca batches they have," she said. "That vaccine is already authorized in Mexico, but doesn't have authorization at the moment in the United States."

Roselyn Lemus-Martin, a Mexican COVID-19 researcher, told [The Guardian](#) that the US may be acting in its best interest by exporting vaccines to its immediate neighbors.

"If Mexico is not vaccinated, people who travel to the US, they're going to probably bring new variants and there are going to probably be a surge of cases ... especially with the new variants because we don't know what variants are in Mexico," Lemus-Martin said.

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'We Believe in Justice': GOP Lawmaker Invokes Lynching During Hearing on US Hate Crimes - Videos

by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties held a hearing Thursday on 'Discrimination and Violence Against Asian Americans.' The hearing comes amid an uptick in targeted violence against Asians in the US, including the recent mass murder of eight people - six of them Asian women - in Atlanta, Georgia.

During the March 18 hearing, Rep. Chip Roy (R-TX) declared that victims of the Atlanta shooting deserve justice, just like "victims of cartels moving illegal aliens deserve justice. The American citizens in south Texas that are getting absolutely decimated by what's happening at our southern border deserve justice."

He also said "justice" was owed to individuals whose businesses were looted or damaged amid race-related demonstrations in the wake of George Floyd's May 2020 murder by Minneapolis Police Department cops.

However, Roy stunned colleagues when he brought up lynching as a form of justice.

"There's an old saying in Texas about 'find all the rope in Texas and get a tall oak tree.' You know, we take justice very seriously and we oughta do that," he said. "Round up the bad guys. That's what we believe."

Roy doubled down on his comments in a statement [to Mediaite](#).

"Apparently some folks are freaking out that I used an old expression about finding all the rope in Texas and a tall oak tree about carrying out justice against bad guys," the GOP lawmaker said.

"I meant it," he said. "We need more justice and less thought police. We need to stop evil doers – such as those who carried out the attack in Atlanta this week, or cartels abusing little children, or those who kill our cops on the streets. We should restore order by tamping out evil actors." According to the lawmaker, the country is presently on a path to "turn American into an authoritarian state like the Chinese Communists who seek to destroy us."

"No apologies," he concluded.

GOP Lawmaker Lambasted by Asian American Colleagues

Roy also blasted the Chinese government during the hearing, alleging that Beijing hid the "reality" of the novel coronavirus.

He argued that former US President Donald Trump and other politicians' were within their right to publicly criticize the Chinese government, and question the origins of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus because Beijing officials are the "bad guys."

Many critics of the former US president's rhetoric, including current White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, have tied his comments to the uptick in violence against Asian Americans. Reps. Ted Lieu (D-CA) and Grace Meng (D-NY), who are both Taiwanese Americans, have publicly responded to Roy's comments.

"Chip Roy glorified lynching at a hearing on violence against Asians. The largest mass lynching in US history was against Chinese immigrants," [Lieu tweeted](#). "I served on active duty in the US military to defend [Roy's] right to say stupid, racist stuff. I just wish he would stop saying it."

Meng spoke directly to Roy on Thursday and said that Trump, Republicans and any other politicians can "can talk about issues with any other country that you want -- but you don't have to do it by putting a bullseye on the back of Asian Americans across this country, on our grandparents, on our kids."

During the subcommittee hearing, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) [noted](#) that "[h]ate crimes and hate incidents against Asian Americans have been on the rise since 2017."

"Last year alone, nearly three thousand eight hundred incidents were reported, with about sixty eight percent of Asian Americans reporting that they have experienced racial slurs or verbal harassment since the pandemic began."

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Biden: US 'Ahead of Schedule,' on Track to Meet 100 Million COVID-19 Vaccine Shots by Friday
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US President Joe Biden initially set a goal for the US to administer 100 million COVID-19 vaccine shots within the first 100 days of his presidency. Friday, March 19, will be Biden's 58th day in office.

During his [Thursday address](#) to the American public, Biden announced that Friday, which marks "58 days into our administration, we will have met my goal of administering 100 million shots to our fellow Americans."

"That's weeks ahead of schedule, and even with the setbacks we faced during the winter storms. And it's another big step on the path to checking the — putting checks in pockets and shots in people's arms," he added.

Biden boasted that experts told him his initial plan - to administer 100 million COVID-19 vaccines to Americans in the first 100 days of his presidency - was "definitely aggressive" and would require a "seamless" distribution plan.

"Eight weeks ago, only 8 percent of seniors, those most vulnerable to COVID-19, had received a vaccination," Biden said.

"Today, 65 percent of people aged 65 or older have received at least one shot, and 36 percent are fully vaccinated. And that's key — because this is a population that represents 80 percent of the well over 500,000 COVID-19 deaths that have occurred in America.

Moving forward, Americans can expect vaccine progress updates "every time we hit the 50 million mark," the US president said.

As folks in the US continue to get vaccinated, Washington is [finalizing deals](#) to export a total of four million AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines to Canada and Mexico, despite concerns about the vaccine's safety. Mexico is slated to receive 2.5 million doses of the controversial vaccine, while Canada is estimated to receive 1.5 million doses, according to White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki.

The World Health Organization [acknowledged](#) on Wednesday that "some countries in the European Union have temporarily suspended use of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine as a precautionary measure based on reports of rare blood coagulation disorders."

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Videos: FBI Releases New Footage of 10 Violent Capitol Riot Suspects Who Remain At-Large by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

To date, law enforcement authorities have arrested hundreds of individuals who participated in the deadly January 6 insurrection, charging more than 65 rioters with assaulting federal officers. However, as investigators have continued to review various security images, many suspects remain unaccounted for.

The US' Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released multiple graphic videos on Thursday detailing the events that unfolded during the Capitol riot, in an attempt to identify 10 of the most violent suspects that remain at-large.

The 10 individuals who were filmed assaulting police officers at the Capitol grounds are seen doing so with a variety of weapons, including chemical sprays, clubs and a device similar to a cattle prod.

In [one video](#), a man is seen using what appears to be using a baton-like stick to repeatedly strike an officer, before opting to fling the object directly at a group of authorities stationed at the Capitol. In [another video](#), as a large trash bin is shot put toward officials, one rioter sporting a red "Make America Great Again" hat is seen swinging a large club at a line of police suited in riot gear.

In [other cases](#), a few of the filmed rioters were caught using their fists to assault police, while [some opted](#) for spraying a type of chemical irritants on forces.

One of the more shocking videos released by the agency shows an individual using what is believed to be a cattle prod - an electric shock device similar to a stun gun instrument - to corner police.

The bureau explained in its Thursday release that the footage had been disclosed with the desire that the public could provide any valuable information regarding the whereabouts of the highlighted suspects.

"The FBI is asking for the public's help in identifying 10 individuals suspected of being involved in some of the most violent attacks on officers who were protecting the US Capitol and our democratic process on January 6," Steven M. D'Antuono, assistant director in charge of the FBI's Washington Field Office, said in a [statement](#) accompanying the release.

"These individuals are seen on video committing egregious crimes against those who have devoted their lives to protecting the American people."

"We know it can be a difficult decision to report information about family, friends, or coworkers, but it is the right thing to do, and the FBI continues to need your help to identify these suspects," D'Antuono added.

In the wake of the Capitol siege, reports indicated that [roughly 140](#) police officers were injured during the violent storming of the federal building. It's believed the amount of injured officers is higher than reported, as many officials chose to forgo reporting their case to senior leadership.

The FBI release came days after authorities [arrested](#) two men for assaulting Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, who later died after succumbing to injuries sustained while holding off rioters. At present, more than 300 rioters have been arrested for participating in the insurrection.

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Trump's Doral Resort May Transform Into Florida's Next Gambling Destination, Report Suggests
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Trump family is no stranger to the casino lifestyle, as former US President Donald Trump himself organized the launch of such businesses over years. However, not all experience has been ideal, especially when considering the Trump family's past casino dealings ended in bankruptcy.

Eric Trump, the third eldest son of the former commander-in-chief, is seeking to turn his family's Doral golf resort in Florida into the Sunshine State's next gambling destination, a proposal that could very well shake up the state's already tense gaming debate that has been ongoing for years.

Although new gaming measures allowing for the change at the Doral resort have yet to be passed by the Florida Legislature, political insiders are hinting that new legislation is on the horizon for developers.

Citing sources, The Washington Post [recently reported](#) that state lawmakers are weighing the possibility of putting forth legislation that would clear the way for real estate developers to grant gambling permits to properties, without requiring the approval of municipal governments.

The report suggests that the initiative, which has been ongoing for multiple years, is now being supported by state Senate President Wilton Simpson, a Republican lawmaker who represents Florida's 10th congressional district. It's worth noting, however, that legislation for the push has not been written or officially introduced in the Statehouse.

Trump, who currently serves as an executive at the Trump Organization, told the Post via an emailed statement that transforming his family's Doral property into a casino resort would only be a natural choice.

Some furloughs at the Trump golf resort in South Florida are becoming permanent layoffs. A notice that the Trump National Doral Miami filed with the State of Florida last week says it is permanently laying off 250 workers out of 560 employees who were furloughed in March. The positions include cooks, housekeepers, servers, engineers, golf concierges and service attendants.

"Many people consider Trump Doral to be unmatched from a gaming perspective - at 700 acres, properties just don't exist of that size and quality in South Florida, let alone in the heart of Miami," he told the outlet, before declining to reveal whether the Trump Organization was formally pushing for the possible legislation.

At present, gambling within the state is mostly only allowed through tribal casinos or at racetracks.

The chances of the Doral being transformed has been largely bolstered by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a close ally of the former president who is believed to be able to boost the likelihood of getting such a bill signed into law.

Katie Betta, a spokesperson for Simpson, told the Post that “gaming negotiations are extremely complicated, and while Simpson believes the efforts are worthy, it is also important to be realistic about where we are.”

Although Betta remarked that Simpson has not discussed gambling matters with Trump, policymakers have suggested that a policy could be introduced sometime this week or in the coming week.

Should the Florida legislature manage to successfully push the bill through state chambers, the effort is likely to serve as a cash cow for the Trump family business since the Doral’s revenues took a sharp dive as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the former president’s divisive politics. [Bloomberg analysis](#) suggests revenues at the Doral plummeted by \$57 million in 2020.

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US House Passes Two Immigration Bills Creating Pathway to Citizenship
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Congress’ latest move comes as the Biden administration has been dealing with a skyrocketing number of unaccompanied migrant children arriving at the US-Mexico border. The situation has led to overcrowded Border Patrol facilities, and even a stern warning from US President Joe Biden urging migrants to not travel to the Land of the Free.

The House of Representatives passed the first of two immigration proposals on Thursday that will create a path to citizenship for millions of immigrants living in the US without legal documentation.

The bill, deemed the American Dream and Promise Act, cleared the chamber with a vote of 228 in favor and 197 against. A total of nine Republicans, [six of whom](#) voted in favor of similar legislation in 2019, crossed party lines to approve the measure.

Under the legislation, which was sponsored by Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA), a pathway to citizenship would be provided to more than 2.3 million immigrants who arrived in the US as minors before January 1, 2021, as well as individuals who were beneficiaries of temporary humanitarian programs.

If signed into law, would-be applicants would be eligible to apply for a 10-year period of conditional permanent residence. However, in order to be considered an applicant, individuals would first need to meet [certain criteria](#), such as earning a high school diploma or equivalent degree and being able to pass a background check, among other requirements.

Applying for a permanent residence would require applicants to earn a college degree or enrolled in a bachelor’s program for two years, or serve in the military for a minimum of two years. Additionally, potential applicants can be eligible for the program if they’ve been employed in the US for at least three years.

For Dreamers, unauthorized immigrants who came to the US as minors, the bill would allow them to access federal financial aid. The measure would also provide relief for Dreamers who were deported from the US under the Trump administration.

At present, there is no process that provides a pathway to citizenship for immigrants who arrived in the US as minors.

House Clears Second Immigration Policy for Farmworkers

House lawmakers also took the opportunity to pass on Thursday the H.R. 1603 immigration proposal, otherwise known as the [Farm Workforce Modernization Act](#), with a vote of 247 to 174. The bipartisan measure from Reps. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) and Dan Newhouse (R-WA) gained the support of 30 Republicans. One Democrat, Maine's Rep. Jared Golden, voted against the bill. If passed through the Senate and signed into law, the measure would allow farmworkers - as well as their spouses and children - to gain legal status through continued employment in the agriculture sector.

Interested applicants would be eligible for the program if they have worked at least 180 days in the US during a 2-year period. However, if long-term workers seek to obtain a permanent residency in the US, they would need to complete either four or eight years of additional agricultural work, depending if they worked more or less than 10 years in the sector.

Additionally, the bill will provide several changes to the H-2A visa program, such as making visas valid for three years the new standard, instead of requiring an applicant to request yearly extensions.

The H.R. 1603 act previously passed the House in December 2019 with a vote of 260 for and 165 against. At the time, more than 20 Republicans sided with Democrats in passing the bill. Both bills now head to the US Senate, where they're likely to face an uphill battle in the evenly divided congressional chamber. In order to pass the measures, all Democrats and at least 10 Republican lawmakers would need to vote in favor to avoid a filibuster.

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'We Are Stronger': Zarif Says US' Economic Terrorism Campaign Was Complete Failure
Russian Foreign Ministry
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Under the Trump administration, Iran was repeatedly subjected to the US' "maximum pressure" campaign that saw Washington reimpose previously lifted sanctions, and the addition of a slew of financial hurdles and designations.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif told the Iranian public during a Thursday address that in spite of all of Washington's efforts to sabotage the Middle Eastern country, the nation was able to overcome multiple hurdles.

Zarif remarked during his address that Iranians have managed to demonstrate their "ironclad resilience" over the past year, as the country faced a series of sanctions and renewed tensions that emerged under the Trump administration.

The Iranian diplomat further highlighted how the Iranian public was able to confront “economic terrorism targeting our access to food and medicine,” and stand “up to [a] modern-day state terrorist who murdered the pioneers of our defense and scientific advancement.”

“All of this amid the deadliest pandemic humanity has seen in a century,” Zarif said, underscoring how all of the obstacles created by Washington failed to “bring us to our knees.” Looking to the future, the foreign minister reiterated that, “We, Iranians, are not just surviving, but we are stronger and more determined, more than ever, to decide our own destiny.”

“Iran’s economy is becoming immunized against outside economic coercion, and while most of the world economy has been shattered, we have officially exited recession, with innovative startups and industrial production leading our growth,” Zarif continued.

“With the defeat of COVID-19 around the corner, God willing, we have a chance to build a different world,” he said. “We, all of us, should seize this opportunity and bring forth a new day.” Zarif’s commentary, which came in a video address marking the start of Nowruz, the Persian New Year, followed earlier remarks in which he [condemned the US](#) for its continued meddling in Middle East affairs.

Since the US withdrawal from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, both Washington and Tehran have maintained tense ties with one another, with matters escalating even further when the US ordered strikes in early January 2020 that [killed](#) Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani. Under the Biden administration, relations have not improved much as the US refuses to relent on sanctions, instead requiring Tehran to make more concessions. For its part, Iran has indicated that it’s willing to come back under the terms of the nuclear deal as long as the US eases its financial restrictions, effectively putting both countries at a stalemate.

Recently, Iran broke further away from its [JCPOA commitments](#) when Iranian officials opted to enrich uranium supplies with the more advanced IR-4 centrifuges.

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RPT - US Media Did Not Change Crimea Coverage Under Biden - Advocacy Group

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"There hasn't been any significant shift in coverage of Russia under the Biden administration," Cawood said. "The only difference is that Russia has become less of a focal point, and that's because it's become less valuable as a political weapon in domestic issues."

US media are painting Russia in a negative light and omitting key facts that would help Americans contextualize the situation in Crimea, he added.

"For example, the American media outlets we analyzed consistently left out facts from their reporting such as the reality that Crimea is home to an ethnic Russian majority, that Crimeans overwhelmingly support reunification, and that what happened in 2014 closely resembles what happened in Kosovo which the United States recognizes," Cawood noted.

Such one-sided media coverage affects everyday Americans' views on Russia, he acknowledged.

"It gives Americans the impression that Moscow is the aggressor, the alpha and omega in creating chaos, and that the United States is fully justified in sanctioning Russia,' he said. However, Cawood added, this does not mean the negative media trend is entirely politically motivated.

"There are a lot of good people with good intentions in the American media and so I would like to give them the benefit of the doubt," he said. "It's more likely that this biased coverage stems from a systemic state of groupthink that's present in these institutions. So many of the newsrooms in the United States are filled with people who think the same and who are constantly engaging with people who reinforce their already held beliefs."

The Ru-PAC founder expressed confidence that getting together positive voices on Russia in the US mainstream conversations is the only way to change the current situation.

"I believe that starts with organizing and that's something Ru-PAC is currently doing," he said. In a recent study, Ru-PAC revealed systematic bias in media coverage of Crimea in 2014-2020. "More than 97 percent of the articles analyzed from CNN and The New York Times used negative framing to describe events. In comparison, The Washington Post used negative framing in only 83 percent of its articles," the report said.

Crimea rejoined Russia on March 16, 2014, after over 95 percent of voters backed the move in a referendum, which followed a violent power change in Ukraine. Two days later, an agreement on Crimea's accession to the Russian Federation was signed. Since 2015, March 18 is an official holiday on the peninsula.

Ru-PAC is an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organization dedicated to developing and strengthening the relationship between the United States and Russia through education, dialogue, and policy recommendations that promote the interests and security of both countries, the organization's website read.

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RPT - US Conceals Details on Extradition of American Who Fought With Ukraine Militia - Official

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is concealing details on the extradition of US citizen Craig Lang, an Army veteran who is wanted in the United States for murder but currently detained in Ukraine, Department of Justice spokesperson Nicole Navas told Sputnik. "We wouldn't make any comments on extradition matters until the person is here in the United States," Navas said.

Lang, 30, and his coconspirator Alex Zwiefelhofer, 23, have been charged with killing a couple and stealing \$3,000 from them in April 2018 in the US state of Florida.

Zwiefelhofer is in federal police custody and awaiting trial, but Lang is in Ukraine awaiting extradition after a Ukrainian court approved the US request to deliver him to the United States. Lang killed and robbed the couple in order to fund his trips overseas to join a far-right extremist group called the Right Sector in eastern Ukraine.

Lang was arrested by Ukrainian authorities in 2019 after Interpol issued a warrant for his arrest.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Biden Not Accepting Putin's Offer to Talk Shows US 'Lost' in Multipolar World

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's decision to ignore Russian President Vladimir Putin's offer to hold a bilateral meeting shows that Washington fails to understand its place in the multipolar world order and is sleepwalking toward conflict, experts told Sputnik.

Putin had invited the US president to talk live on Friday or Monday in the wake of harsh comments by Biden, but White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said she has nothing to report on a possible conversation between the two leaders.

On Wednesday, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Russian ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Antonov, was called back to Moscow for consultations to analyze what needs to be done in the context of relations with the United States. Antonov is set to travel to Russia on Saturday.

US LOST IN MULTI-POLAR WORLD

Earlier this week, Biden said during an interview with ABC News that Putin would "pay a price" for allegedly meddling in the US 2020 election. Biden was also asked if he believed Putin was a "killer" to which he answered affirmatively. The Russian embassy in the US said Biden's ill-considered statement has endangered Washington's relationship with Moscow.

"The comments made recently by Mr. Biden are very disturbing. Mr. Biden and his staff appear to need a primer on foreign diplomacy," Eurasia Center Vice President Earl Rasmussen told Sputnik, noting that these remarks are not surprising but very damaging to US-Russian relations.

The White House, he added, made a very poor decision by turning down the opportunity to maintain direct talks with the Russian president.

"I would assume that they are trying to buffer themselves and perhaps assess some type of movement forward. But thus far they seem lost in an ever increasingly complicated multipolar environment," Rasmussen said.

The United States, he added, is currently moving on "a very disturbing and dangerous" path.

"President Putin seems to be offering an opportunity to explain the misplaced accusatory comments recently made by President Biden as well as recent military moves in eastern Ukraine and the Middle East, release of the evidence free National Intelligence report attempting to prolong the evidence free Russia-Gate hoax, and perhaps as well a multitude of other issues," Rasmussen said.

He also suggested that perhaps the comments were politically directed toward the internal US national audience.

"Still, in my view, misplaced and a very poor move by the Biden administration," Rasmussen said.

WHO IS THE RESPONSIBLE LEADER?

Democrats had often slammed the Trump administration for what they saw as a reckless approach to world affairs. However, Biden appears to have made what some experts say are strategic missteps since taking office, including a missile strike against Iran-linked militia in Syria, which members of his own party were harshly critical of.

President of American University in Moscow Edward Lozansky noted the two leaders' different reactions on the current situation.

"When Biden calls Putin a killer, the Russian leader wishes him good health. When Putin suggests talking to discuss how to avoid a worst case scenario in the relations between two major nuclear powers, Biden snubs him," Lozansky told Sputnik.

Lozansky said this raises some key questions.

"Who is a responsible world leader who cares about saving humanity and who is an inadequate one pushing us, as Senator Sam Nunn and many leading world's experts warn, into sleepwalking towards nuclear catastrophe?" Lozansky asked rhetorically.

Rasmussen also pointed out the irresponsible nature of the Biden administration's early track record since taking over on January 20.

"The recent US foreign policy missteps are numerous despite less than 60 days in office," Rasmussen concluded.

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RPT - Sentencing of Toronto Van Attacker Put Over Until End of May - Spokesperson

TORONTO, March 18 (Sputnik) - The sentencing of the perpetrator of the deadly 2018 Toronto van attack has been put over until May 31, an Attorney General Ministry spokesperson told Sputnik.

On April 23, 2018, then 25-year-old Alex Minassian drove a van along a sidewalk through one of Toronto's busiest pedestrian corridors for over a mile, ultimately killing ten and injuring 16. Minassian was found guilty on all 26 counts of murder and attempted murder by Ontario Superior Court of Justice judge Anne Molloy earlier this month.

"On March 18, 2021, this matter was adjourned to May 31, 2021 at 10:00 am to be spoken to. No sentencing submissions were made at today's appearance," Brian Gray said in a statement on Thursday.

According to The Canadian Press, Molloy did not provide a reason for the delay in proceeding during the morning hearing, which was closed to the media and public.

The former IT-student had pleaded not guilty to the charges, with his lawyers arguing that Minassian was not criminally responsible for his actions because of a mental disorder. However, Molloy rejected the argument, ruling that Minassian was fully aware of impact of his actions and the attack was reasoned and carefully planned.

Following the massacre, Minassian published messages on Facebook in which he saluted Elliot Rodger, who killed six and injured 13 in a shooting rampage at the University of California at Santa Barbara four years earlier for similar reasons, and proclaimed that the "incel rebellion" had begun.

In her reasoning, Molloy had noted that Minassian, admittedly guided by incel ideology – an online subculture of so-called "involuntary celibates," who are unable to find a romantic or sexual partner and espouse hostile views towards sexually active members of the public, particularly women – wanted to achieve fame and notoriety through the attack, and had been fantasizing about committing such a crime for over a decade.

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US Accuses China of 'Grandstanding' in Alaska Bilateral Meeting - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is accusing China of grandstanding during the US-China meeting in Alaska between top diplomat and security officials, a senior US administration official said in a statement.

"The Chinese delegation, on the other hand, seems to have arrived intent on grandstanding, focused on public theatrics and dramatics over substance," the US official said on Thursday. China reportedly raised the United States' poor human rights record with the African-American community among other concerns.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on Thursday sparred with their Chinese counterparts as both nations' rivalry continues unabated under the new US administration. The meeting took place with Chinese State Councilor Wang Yi and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi.

The Biden administration has officially defined its relationship with China as the biggest geopolitical test for US in the twenty-first century.

The US delegation said it would raise well-known concerns about China's human rights violations, including in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, its economic coercion and political intimidation of foreign countries, malign cyberactivities and military buildup. China routinely rejects American allegations as an unacceptable interference in its internal affairs.

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US House Passes Legislation to Grant Undocumented Farm Workers Legal Status

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed a bill that would grant undocumented farmer workers legal status in the United States.

The House on Thursday evening passed the Farm Workforce Modernization Act with a 247-174 vote, sending the measure to the Senate for consideration.

Earlier in the day, the House also passed the American Dream and Promise Act, which would create a pathway to citizenship for immigrants brought to the United States illegally as children, also known as "Dreamers," as well as for migrants enjoying temporary protected status and beneficiaries of the so-called deferred enforced departure.

President Joe Biden has said he wants Congress to pass legislation to clear the path to citizenship for nearly 11 million illegal aliens living in the United States and form visa programs for temporary migrant workers in certain industries.

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US Mulling 6-Month Extension of Troop Deployment in Afghanistan - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering extending the US troop deployment in Afghanistan by six months instead of pulling out all personnel by the May 1 deadline, CNN reported citing a US defense official.

The report said on Thursday that no final decision has been made, but the US administration would want to get the Taliban movement to agree to the extension.

Earlier this week, President Joe Biden said a full withdrawal from Afghanistan is possible but it would be difficult to do so by the May 1 deadline as agreed to in the deal with the Taliban.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid responded by stating that "the Doha agreement should be implemented."

The United States and the Taliban signed their agreement last February. Among other things, the deal stipulated the withdrawal of foreign armed forces from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban abating violence and guaranteeing that the country will not turn into a safe haven for terrorists.

US officials have expressed concern that violence from the Taliban against Afghan forces is still too high.

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Russian National Pleads Guilty for Role in Cyber Attack Against US Firm - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Russian national Egor Igorevich Kriuchkov has pleaded guilty for his role in a scheme to spread malware into a company network in the United States, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"A Russian national pleaded guilty in federal court today for conspiring to travel to the United States to recruit an employee of a Nevada company into a scheme to introduce malicious software into the company's computer network," the release said on Thursday. "According to court documents and admissions made in court, from July 15, 2020, to Aug. 22, 2020, Egor Igorevich Kriuchkov, 27, conspired with others to recruit an employee of a large US company to transmit malware provided by the conspirators into the company's computer network."

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UPDATE - Canadian Authorities Made Effort to Share Huawei CFO's Phone Passcodes With FBI - Defense

TORONTO, March 18 (Sputnik) - Canadian authorities made a concerted effort to covertly share Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou's phone passcodes with the FBI, a lawyer representing the executive said.

Extradition hearings against Meng resumed earlier on Thursday, with the executive's defense team arguing that misconduct on the part of Canadian authorities is in line with the "second branch" of abuse of process.

During the arrest at Vancouver's International Airport, Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) agents sealed the executive's mobile devices special bags, designed to prevent remote wiping, and transferred it to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) but not before a border agent obtained passcodes to the phones from Meng and placed them in the bags.

"Why would you need the passcodes," Defense attorney Tony Paisana asked British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Heather Holmes, elaborating that the bags were not to be unsealed before the transfer.

"That context, coupled with the timing, minutes before she's about to be turned over to the RCMP, we say indicates that the purpose of this act - the compulsion of her passcode - would be to ultimately share it with the one party that would care, the FBI," Paisana said.

In earlier hearings, Canadian officers testified that the passcodes to the Huawei executive's phones were obtained just moments before her arrest. CBSA officer Scott Kirkland told the British Columbia Supreme Court in October 2020 that he placed the passcodes to the phones -

in violation of procedure - in error. Paisana told the court it is his belief that Kirkland was "untruthful" his testimony.

The defense attorney also rejected the notion that that the agents were inexperienced or made trivial errors, saying the officers in question had previously participated in extradition process and their internal discussions indicated they were knowledgeable about the mandate they possessed. Additionally, Paisana quoted earlier testimony which revealed that supervising officers ordered that transgressions not to be documented.

"The fact they didn't do a great job violating her rights, doesn't mean they didn't violate her rights," Paisana said.

The Huawei executive's legal counsel also took issue with her questioning by border agents, saying that questions about Iran - the subject of the US Justice Department's complaint against Meng - also advanced FBI interests.

When asked by Holmes about generally mild tone of questioning concerning Iran, Paisana purported that the agents did not want to tip her off about the true nature of the enhanced screening and allow her the opportunity to seek legal counsel in short order.

Meng, the daughter of Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, was arrested on December 1, 2018 at Vancouver International Airport during a layover stop at the request of the US government.

Meng is wanted by US authorities for her alleged role in violating sanctions against Iran. The Justice Department alleges that Meng committed financial transgressions by misleading multinational financial conglomerate, HSBC, into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014.

The arrests of Meng and two Canadian nationals - diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor - on charges of espionage in China, along with other disputes have reduced bilateral relations between the two countries to their lowest point in years.

The trial of the "two Michaels" - as the pair is referred to at home - will begin on Friday, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau revealed on Wednesday.

Both nations view the detention of their nationals by the other as political incidents.

The hearings in this extradition case are expected to conclude in mid-May.

Meng remains under house arrest in Vancouver, although is free to traverse the region in the company of state-imposed guards outside of her 11:00 p.m to 6:00 a.m. curfew.

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US Sentences Ex-Diplomat to 18 Months for Trafficking Fake Goods - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Former US State Department employee Gene Leroy Thompson Jr. has been sentenced to 18 months in prison and three years of supervised release for trafficking counterfeit goods while working at the US Embassy in Seoul, the Department of Justice said in a release.

"A former US Department of State employee and his spouse were sentenced today for their roles in a conspiracy to traffic hundreds of thousands of dollars in counterfeit goods through

e-commerce accounts operated from State Department computers at the US Embassy in Seoul, Republic of Korea," the release said on Thursday.

The Justice Department said Thomson Jr. served as an Information Programs Officer and used his office computer to create multiple e-commerce accounts to sell counterfeit goods between September 2017 and December 2019.

Thomson Jr.'s wife, Guajiao Zhang, was responsible for the accounts' operation as well as with communicating with customers and purchasing merchandise to be stored in the District of Oregon from where items were sent to buyers across the United States, the release said.

Zhang was sentenced to three years of supervised release with the first eight months consisting of home confinement, the release added.

Both defendants will also pay a penalty in the amount of \$229,302., according to the release.

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FBI Releases Videos of Capitol Riot in Bid to Identify 10 Suspects in Attacks on Police

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Videos from inside the US Capitol during a January 6 riot by a group of supporters of then-President Donald Trump were posted on line in an attempt to identify some of the worst assaults on police officers, the FBI said.

"The FBI is asking for the public's help in identifying 10 individuals suspected of being involved in some of the most violent attacks on officers who were protecting the US Capitol and our democratic process on January 6," FBI Assistant Director in charge of the agency's Washington, DC field office said in a press release on Thursday.

FBI has arrested more than 300 individuals who took part in the incident at the US Capitol. Of those, more than 65 were arrested for assaulting law enforcement officers, the release said. However, some of the most violent offenders have yet to be identified, including the ten seen assaulting officers in the video footage, the release added.

The series of ten videos posted by the FBI show police officers being assaulted in a variety of ways.

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US House Passes Bill to Grant Citizenship to Migrants Brought to US Illegally as Children

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed a measure that would create a pathway to citizenship for immigrants brought to the United States illegally as children, also known as "Dreamers," as well as for migrants enjoying temporary protected status.

The House on Thursday passed the American Dream and Promise Act with a 228-197 vote and sent the measure to the Senate for consideration.

The bill also creates a pathway to citizenship for beneficiaries of the so-called deferred enforced departure.

President Joe Biden has said he wants Congress to pass legislation to clear the path to citizenship for nearly 11 million illegal aliens living in the United States and form visa programs for temporary migrant workers in certain industries.

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US Successfully Tests Artemis Moon Rocket Engines in 8 Minute Firing - NASA

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) successfully hot-tested the four RS-25 rocket engines of the Space Launch Vehicle (SLS) for the Artemis manned missions to the Moon program in an eight minute firing.

"They clearly got the full range they were after: The applause says a lot," NASA engineer Kathryn Hambleton said in a live podcast on Thursday. "[It] looks pretty good right now . They got through the test."

The test engines, which were built by Boeing, fired for almost eight times as long as in the first hot fire test on February 16 for the second hot fire test of the core stage for the agency's SLS rocket at the Stennis Space Center near Bay St. Louis in the US state of Mississippi, the space agency said.

In preparation for the firing, NASA engineers powered up all the core stage systems. They loaded 840,000 gallons of liquid hydrogen and 200,000 gallons of liquid oxygen cryogenic, or super cold, propellant into the tanks and fired the four engines to simulate take-off, generating 1.6 million pounds of thrust, the agency said.

Later, the Artemis I mission will test the SLS rocket and Orion spacecraft as an integrated system ahead of manned flights to the Moon, NASA added.

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US Stocks Slump With Nasdaq Down 3%

NEW YORK, March 18 (Sputnik) - Wall Street tumbled on Thursday, with tech stocks barometer Nasdaq losing 3 percent for its worst drop in nearly two months, as investors reacted with dismay to the Federal Reserve's decision not to ramp up bond buying to tamp down soaring yields.

The Nasdaq has been the poster-child for overvalued US equities this year, given the high-flying prices of stocks such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, and has on many days fallen more than rival US indices, the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the S&P500. Thursday was another one of those days, when it fell nearly 409 points to close at 13,116.17. The 3.0 percent was Nasdaq's biggest one-day drop since February 25.

The S&P500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, fell 1.5 percent, or 59 points, to close at 3,915.

The Dow, Wall Street's broadest stock indicator and comprising mostly industrial stocks, slipped 0.5 percent, or 153 points, to finish at 32,862.

The slump in stocks came after Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said the central bank will maintain its bond buying at the pace of \$120 billion a month to support an economy recovering from the grips of the coronavirus.

Yields benchmarked to ten-year US bonds hit a 13-month high of 1.7 percent on Thursday, adding stress to the performance of risk assets, including stocks. Yields have spiked on the argument that economic recovery in the coming months could extend beyond the Federal Reserve expectations and result in spiraling inflation, despite the central bank's insisting on keeping interest rates at near zero.

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US Indicts Man Over Threats to Kill Trump, Other Officials - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - A 33-year-old man from the state of Illinois faces charges in a six-count indictment over a series of letters threatening to kill former President Donald Trump and other US officials, the Department of Justice said in a press release.

"Damien Grant, 33 ... is charged with three counts of influencing a federal official by threat, two counts of mailing threatening communications, and one count of threatening the President of the United States," the release said on Thursday.

The Justice Department said one letter Grant sent to Trump in December 2020 and quoted in the indictment was especially chilling.

"The moment you walk out of your office, I'm going to have you shot. ... I'm going to make a nacho and sit back and laugh when your head splatters all over your wife and Secret Service," Grant wrote.

In November and December, Grant made threats in a series of six letters, each resulting in one count in the indictment.

Grant also wrote threatening letters to a district court judge, a police officer and US Attorney, all in the state of Illinois where Grant faces trial, the indictment said.

The charge of threatening the US President carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison, while each of the other counts is punishable by a sentence of up to ten years, according to the release.

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McConnell Says Democrats Trying to Overturn US House Seat Won in 2020 Election

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Congressional Democrats are trying to overturn the result of the November 2020 election for a seat in the US House of Representatives from the state of Iowa, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said.

"The voters of Iowa's 2nd District spoke in November. Their votes were counted. Then recounted. The outcome was certified," McConnell said on Thursday. "This time, the Republican won and the Democrat lost. So Speaker [Nancy] Pelosi and Washington Democrats have set out trying to overturn the result from here in Congress."

McConnell said Democrats are using "brutal" political tactics to remove US Congresswoman Mariannette Miller-Meeks from the House and replace her with Democrat Rita Hart.

He said Democrats are attempting to use their slim majority in the House to effectuate a permanent partisan power grab.

McConnell also said the attempts to remove Miller-Meeks are taking place at the same time as they are trying to rewrite election rules in all 50 US states.

In November, Miller-Meeks won the congressional seat from Iowa's 2nd district in the closest race of 2020. She received 196,964 votes - six votes more than her opponent Rita Hart.

However, Hart has claimed the vote count missed 22 additional ballots that were tossed away because of issues with the envelope.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik)

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* US President Joe Biden does not regret calling Russian President Vladimir Putin "a killer," White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday.

* US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan remains in Moscow and continues to stay engaged with the Russian people, Psaki said.

* The United States will not rely on sanctions alone in trying to influence Russia's behavior as President Biden has a range of alternative tools at his disposal, Psaki said.

* Putin said that he would instruct the Russian Foreign Ministry to work out the issue of a live conversation with Biden and was ready to speak with the US president on Friday or Monday.

* Putin invited Biden to organize live discussion, which would be of interest to the peoples of Russia and the United States.

* The Russian Foreign Ministry is awaiting the arrival of Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov to analyze and develop additional approaches in the relations between the two countries, spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

NORD STREAM 2 PIPELINE

* Germany promises the United States to strengthen support for Ukraine in the discussion of conditions for the completion of Nord Stream 2 without additional sanctions, the Handelsblatt newspaper reported on Thursday, citing a government source in Berlin.

* The US State Department is warning companies involved in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that they are at risk of being sanctioned and should abandon their work immediately, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

MOSCOW CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN

* Afghan delegations plan to hold a number of bilateral and trilateral meetings in Moscow, Russia's special presidential representative for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, said on Thursday.

* The delegations of the Afghan government and the Taliban movement will continue negotiations in Moscow on Friday, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, head of Afghanistan's Hezb-e-Islami militant organization said.

* The Afghan government will focus on the ceasefire and safeguards for women's rights during talks with the Taliban in Moscow, Nader Nadery, a senior presidential adviser, told Sputnik on Thursday, on the sidelines of the conference on Afghanistan in the Russian capital.

* All Afghan delegations confirmed their readiness to establish peace in the country during the Moscow conference on Afghanistan on Thursday, Kabulov said.

* The extended Troika called on Thursday on the warring parties in Afghanistan to reduce violence and create an environment for a political settlement to the conflict.

US SENATE CONFIRMS NEW CIA DIRECTOR

* US Senate confirmed on Thursday William Burns as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, the chamber's press gallery said.

POLITICAL CRISIS IN ARMENIA

* Armenia will hold snap parliamentary elections on June 20, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said on Thursday.

* Moscow regards Pashinyan's decision to hold early parliamentary elections in Armenia as the country's internal affair, the Russian Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.

* Pashinyan has not yet resigned from his post as required by the constitution when snap parliamentary elections are called, the press office of the Cabinet of Ministers told Sputnik.

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Over Half of US Federal Prison Employees Refuse Coronavirus Vaccinations - Director

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - More than half of guards and other employees working at US federal decline to be vaccinated for the novel coronavirus despite the inoculations being offered to everyone, US Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Director Michael Carvajal said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"Everyone in the Bureau of Prison, employee wise has had the opportunity, been offered the vaccine, and approximately 49 percent have excepted it," Carvajal said in testimony to the US House Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice and Science.

When asked why the vaccination percentage was so low, Carvajal replied: "I wish I could answer that, but I certainly can't force it [the vaccine] on anyone."

US Congressman Dutch Ruppersberger cited a recent report from Johns Hopkins University saying that coronavirus cases are often detected among staff before prisoners.

"Compared to the rest of the US population, cases in prisons are 3.2 times more prevalent among prison staff and 4.6 times more prevalent among prison residents, who then die from COVID 19 at a three times higher rate than the same age population," Ruppersberger said, citing the Johns Hopkins report.

Carvajal replied that he and his staff continue to encourage everyone to be vaccinated but that legally they can not force prison employees to take the jab.

Ruppersberger responded: "There's got to be a way to change that number because if the guards aren't being protected then the inmates aren't being protected."

There are 125,371 federal inmates in Bureau of Prisons-managed institutions and 13,700 in community-based facilities. The BOP said that it employs 36,000 people of whom 1374 have tested positive for the coronavirus.

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US to Meet Goal of Administering 100Mln Coronavirus Vaccine Shots Friday - Biden

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States on Friday will meet the key goal of administering 100 million coronavirus vaccine shots, US President Joe Biden said on Thursday. "I am proud to announce that tomorrow, 58 days into our administration, we will have met our goal of administering 100 million shots to our fellow Americans," Biden said. "That's weeks ahead of schedule."

Biden pointed out that there has been a significant increase in the number of vaccinated senior citizens.

"Eight weeks ago, only 8 percent of seniors... received the vaccination. Today, 65 percent of people age 65 and over have received at least one shot, and 36 percent are fully vaccinated," Biden said.

As of Thursday afternoon, the United States has reported that 29.6 million people tested positive for the novel coronavirus with more than 538,000 virus-related deaths, the Johns Hopkins University online tracker revealed.

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US Homeless Numbers Spiked in 2020 Even Before Pandemic - Housing Agency Report

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US homelessness grew for the fourth straight year in 2020, jumping two percent even before the outbreak of the pandemic, the Housing and Urban Development agency said in its annual report to Congress on Thursday.

"The number of people experiencing homelessness nationwide increased by two percent between 2019 and 2020, or 12,751 more people. This marks the fourth consecutive year that total homelessness has increased in the United States," the report said. "The point-in-time counts of homelessness... are based on data from January 2020 so do not reflect the health or economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Housing Secretary Marcia Fudge said in the 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment that the increase was troubling and cited as an example the astonishing numbers on a single night at the beginning of the year.

"On a single night in January 2020, 580,466 people - about 18 of every 10,000 people in the United States - experienced homelessness across the United States," Fudge said.

This was a 2.2 percent increase from 2019, she said, adding that the administration is aware that "ensuring that every American has a safe, stable home is a national imperative."

In its \$1.9 trillion pandemic-related American Rescue Plan enacted last week, the administration passed various measures for housing, after acknowledging that most families in the country were struggling to keep a roof over their heads. Under the plan, President Joe Biden called on Congress to extend a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures of mortgages until September 30, 2021.

Aside from that, the plan set aside \$5 billion in emergency assistance to help secure housing for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. It also allocated \$30 billion for rental and energy and water assistance for hard-hit individuals and families.

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US Senate Confirms William Burns as CIA Director by Voice Vote

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US Senate confirmed on Thursday William Burns as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, the chamber's press gallery said.

"Senate confirmed by voice vote... William Joseph Burns, of Maryland, to be Director of the Central Intelligence Agency," the Senate Press Gallery said via Twitter.

Burns is a career diplomat who served as US Ambassador to Jordan and Russia. He rose to the position of Deputy Secretary of State before retiring in 2014. Upon retiring from the State Department, Burns became the head of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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US Conceals Details on Extradition of American Who Fought With Ukraine Militia - Official

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is concealing details on the extradition of US citizen Craig Lang, an Army veteran who is wanted in the United States for murder but currently detained in Ukraine, Department of Justice spokesperson Nicole Navas told Sputnik on Thursday.

"We wouldn't make any comments on extradition matters until the person is here in the United States," Navas said.

Lang, 30, and his coconspirator Alex Zwiefelhofer, 23, have been charged with killing a couple and stealing \$3,000 from them in April 2018 in the US state of Florida.

Zwiefelhofer is in federal police custody and awaiting trial, but Lang is in Ukraine awaiting extradition after a Ukrainian court approved the US request to deliver him to the United States. Lang killed and robbed the couple in order to fund his trips overseas to join a far-right extremist group called the Right Sector in eastern Ukraine.

Lang was arrested by Ukrainian authorities in 2019 after Interpol issued a warrant for his arrest.

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UN Experts Call for Prosecuting Crimes Against Humanity in Myanmar

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - UN human rights experts on Thursday said states should consider invoking universal jurisdiction to prosecute any potential crimes against humanity committed during attacks on protesters in Myanmar.

"These incidents form part of a disturbing emerging pattern of systematic and widespread attacks against the civilian population of Myanmar, and those responsible should be held criminally responsible under international law. States may therefore investigate and prosecute any commander or perpetrator responsible for these acts, including under the principle of universal jurisdiction," the experts said in a statement.

The UN experts are concerned that there are acts of violence being committed in Myanmar that "may amount to crimes against humanity," according to the statement.

According to UN experts' data, at least 121 people have been killed by security forces since last Friday and over 2,400 people have been detained since the military rulers ousted the democratically elected Government on 1 February 2021. In addition, the experts said they are concerned about forced evictions.

As an example, the experts, citing reports, said security forces forcibly evicted around 960 residents at gunpoint in the Mingalar Taung Nyunt neighborhood of Yangon as punishment for taking part in a pro-democracy general strike. Such forced evictions took place in many other states including Chin State (Hakka and Falam), Sagaing State (Homalin) and Shan State (Taunggyi), the statement added.

Earlier this month, the United Nations Children's Fund called on Myanmar's security forces to refrain from violence against children as at least five have been reported killed since protests began in February.

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Canadian Authorities Made Effort to Share Huawei CFO's Phone Passcodes With FBI - Defense

TORONTO, March 18 (Sputnik) - Canadian authorities made a concerted effort to covertly share Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou's phone passcodes with the FBI, a lawyer representing the executive said on Thursday.

Extradition hearings against Meng resumed on Thursday, with the executive's defense team arguing that misconduct on the part of Canadian authorities is in line with the "second branch" of abuse of process.

During the arrest at Vancouver's International Airport, Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) agents sealed the executive's mobile devices special bags, designed to prevent remote wiping, and transferred it to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) but not before a border agent obtained passcodes to the phones from Meng and placed them in the bags.

"Why would you need the passcodes," Defense attorney Tony Paisana asked British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Heather Holmes, elaborating that the bags were not to be unsealed before the transfer.

"That context, coupled with the timing, minutes before she's about to be turned over to the RCMP, we say indicates that the purpose of this act – the compulsion of her passcode – would be to ultimately share it with the one party that would care, the FBI," Paisana said.

In earlier hearings, Canadian officers testified that the passcodes to the Huawei executive's phones were obtained just moments before her arrest. CBSA officer Scott Kirkland told the British Columbia Supreme Court in October 2020 that he placed the passcodes to the phones – in violation of procedure – in error. Paisana told the court it is his belief that Kirkland was "untruthful" his testimony.

The defense attorney also rejected the notion that that the agents were inexperienced or made trivial errors, saying the officers in question had previously participated in extradition process and their internal discussions indicated they were knowledgeable about the mandate they possessed. Additionally, Paisana quoted earlier testimony which revealed that supervising officers ordered that transgressions not to be documented.

"The fact they didn't do a great job violating her rights, doesn't mean they didn't violate her rights," Paisana said.

Meng, the daughter of Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, was arrested on December 1, 2018 at Vancouver International Airport during a layover stop at the request of the US government.

Meng is wanted by US authorities for her alleged role in violating sanctions against Iran. The Justice Department alleges that Meng committed financial transgressions by misleading multinational financial conglomerate, HSBC, into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014.

The arrests of Meng and two Canadian nationals - diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor – on charges of espionage in China, along with other disputes have reduced bilateral relations between the two countries to their lowest point in years.

The trial of the "two Michaels" – as the pair is referred to at home – will begin on Friday, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau revealed on Wednesday.

Both nations view the detention of their nationals by the other as political incidents.

The hearings in this extradition case are expected to conclude in mid-May.

Meng remains under house arrest in Vancouver, although is free to traverse the region in the company of state-imposed guards outside of her 11:00 p.m to 6:00 a.m. curfew.

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US on Friday to Meet Goal of Administering 100 Million COVID-19 Vaccine Shots - Biden

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will on Friday meet a key goal by administering 100 million COVID-19 vaccine shots, US President Joe Biden said on Thursday. "I am proud to announce that tomorrow, 58 days into our administration, we will have met our goal of administering 100 million shots to our fellow Americans," Biden said. "That's weeks ahead of schedule."

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US Assessing How to Loan 7Mln AstraZeneca Vaccine Doses to Mexico, Canada - White House

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is evaluating how to loan 7 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine to other nations including 4 million doses to Mexico and Canada, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

The United States currently sits on 30 million doses of the UK drugmaker's vaccine, while the country's health regulators work to assess its safety and efficacy. Meanwhile, a host of other nations, including neighboring Mexico and Canada, which have authorized the use of the vaccine, have made requests to draw on US stockpiles.

"We are assessing how we can loan doses. It's our aim, it's not fully finalized yet," Psaki told reporters. "I can confirm that we have 7 million releasable doses available of AstraZeneca... 2.5 million of those we are working to finalize plans to land those to Mexico and 1.5 million to Canada."

Psaki again emphasized that vaccinating Americans remains the Biden administration's top priority, but noted that the White House understands the significance of global mass vaccination in bringing the coronavirus pandemic under control.

Former US President Donald Trump signed an executive order to prioritize domestic distribution of vaccines over their shipments to other countries. Some states had expressed hope that new US President Joe Biden would reverse that decision. However, the Biden administration has, to

date, committed to vaccinating the American public before offering help other nations with their immunization regimes.

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US to Provide \$52Mln in Aid for Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide an additional \$52 million in humanitarian assistance to address the crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray region, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Thursday.

"The United States is providing an additional nearly \$52 million in assistance to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray region," Blinken said.

These efforts allow international organizations to support about 4.5 million people in need in Tigray and nearly 62,000 refugees who have fled to Sudan, Blinken said.

"This funding will also help our partners re-establish contact between family members who have been separated due to the conflict," he said.

This latest round of funding brings the total amount of US assistance for the crisis to \$153 million, he added.

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US Senate Confirms William Burns as CIA Director by Voice Vote

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US Senate Confirms William Burns as CIA Director by Voice Vote

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US Wants Relations With Russia to Be Predictable, Stable Down the Line - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States wants relations with Russia to be predictable and stable down the line, US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Thursday.

"Our relationship with Russia will remain a challenge, but it's something that we're actually prepared for," Porter said during a telephone briefing. "But the goal of our relationship with Russia is one that we want to be predictable and stable down the line."

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov will travel to Moscow on Saturday for consultations on the relationship with Washington after US President Joe Biden made harsh comments about Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Russian embassy on Wednesday said ill-considered statements by US leaders have endangered relations with Moscow. White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday that US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan remains in Moscow and continues to stay engaged with the Russian people.

On Wednesday, Porter commented on the recall of the Russian ambassador, saying that the United States will work with Russia to advance US interests while holding Moscow accountable. On Tuesday, the US intelligence community accused Russia of interference in the 2020 US election. The Russian Embassy in Washington said in a statement that the accusations are groundless and that no facts or concrete evidence have been provided to support those claims. A US intelligence report on foreign threats to the 2020 elections claims that Putin authorized efforts to undermine the then Democratic candidate Joe Biden. Putin invited Biden to talk on Friday or Monday to address bilateral issues. Psaki said there is nothing to report on a possible conversation between Putin and Biden.

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Biden Administration Confident It Can Find Ways to Cooperate With Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's administration is confident that it can find ways to cooperate with Moscow and Russian President Vladimir Putin, despite recent tensions between the two countries, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"President Biden and President Putin certainly have different perspectives on their respective countries and how to approach engagement in the world, but where they agree is that we should continue to look for ways to work together, as was noted in part of President Putin's comments," Psaki said. "There are areas of mutual interest - New START, which we just extended for 5 years is an example of that. Obviously, Russia is also a member of the P5+1 as we look ahead to what's possible there as it relates to, you know,, preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. So, We are confident that we can continue to look for ways where there is mutual interest, mutual national interest. But the president is not going to hold back, clearly when he has concerns, whether it is with words or actions."

On Wednesday, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov was invited to Moscow for consultations "in order to analyze what needs to be done in the context of relations with the United States." The ambassador is set to travel to Russia on Saturday.

Psaki said the US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan remains in Moscow and continues to stay engaged with the Russian people.

"We continue to believe that diplomacy is the first step and should always be the first step and should be our objective as we pursue all relationships even with our adversaries. You know, we are hopeful that that will continue to be the case," she said.

Psaki said in the same briefing that Biden does not regret calling Russian President Vladimir Putin a killer. Biden during an interview this week also said that Putin would "pay a price" for allegedly meddling in the US elections.

Putin on Thursday in responding to Biden's remarks said "it takes one to know one." The Russian leader added that this saying "is not just something kids say" or a joke, as there is a deep psychological meaning in this.

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White House Says US Will Not Rely on Sanctions Alone to Deal With Russia, Has More Tools

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The US administration will not rely on sanctions alone in trying to influence Russia's behavior as President Joe Biden has a range of alternative tools at his disposal, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Thursday.

"I don't think we would rely on sanctions alone... There are a range of tools at the disposal of any president, seen and unseen. And I am just not going to get ahead of the process of what considerations are underway," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

She admitted that sanctions "have been effective modes."

Psaki repeated that the US intends to respond within "weeks, not months" to all Russia-attributed misdeeds if verified by the ongoing intelligence review. Russia denies allegations that range from elections interference, to the SolarWinds massive cyberattacks and bounties for killing American soldiers in Afghanistan.

"Weeks, not months remains still the policy. There is, of course, internal policy decision-making to assess and take a look at the review, but also to make decisions about policy engagements. Some of the responses may be seen, some may be unseen. And, of course, the President reserves the right to respond in a manner and time of his choosing, as any President would," Psaki said.

Psaki also said Biden does not regret recent comments he made about Putin, including that the Russian leader would "pay a price."

Moscow recalled its US ambassador over the comments, which the Russian embassy said were ill-considered and have endangered relations between the two countries.

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White House Says 'Nothing to Report' on Putin's Offer to Talk to Biden - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday that she has nothing to report on a possible conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Joe Biden.

Putin had invited the US president to talk live on Friday or Monday. Putin noted that he planned to spend the weekend in the taiga.

"I'll have to get back to you if that is something we are entertaining... I don't have anything to report to you. And in terms of a future meeting, the president will of course be in Georgia tomorrow and quite busy," Psaki said when asked about Putin's offer. "The President already had a conversation with President Putin even as there are more world leaders that he has not yet engaged with, and we engaged with Russian leaders, members of the government at all levels."

Russian President Vladimir Putin said that he would instruct the Russian Foreign Ministry to work out the issue of holding a live conversation with his US counterpart Joe Biden.

Putin said Russia and the United States share the responsibility for strategic stability, this could be discussed with Biden.

On Wednesday, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Russian ambassador to US Anatoly Antonov was invited to Moscow for consultations in order to analyze what needs to be done in the context of relations with the United States. The ambassador is set to travel to Russia on Saturday.

Antonov was recalled for consultations after Biden said during an interview with ABC News that Putin would "pay a price" for allegedly meddling in the US 2020 election. Biden also asked if he believed Putin to be a "killer," to which he answered affirmatively. These statements prompted a response from the Russian lower house chairman, Vyacheslav Volodin, who described Biden's statements as histrionic.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Biden's comments were "very bad statements" and noted that Russia assumes the US president certainly does not seek mending ties.

Peskov qualified the relations between Moscow and Washington as "very poor", also noting that finding ways to mend ties falls outside the Kremlin's mandate.

Moscow will not act to worsen bilateral relations, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Thursday.

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US Aerospace Firm Teams Up With NASA to Build Hypersonic Aircraft - Hermeus

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has signed an agreement with a US aerospace company to develop commercial aircraft capable of flying at five or six times the speed of sound (Mach 5 or Mach 6), Hermeus said in a press release on Thursday.

"Hermeus, the aerospace company developing Mach 5 aircraft, announced today the signing of a Space Act Agreement (SAA) with NASA for research and development of high-speed aircraft," the release said.

NASA's most recent hypersonic aircraft was the X-43, an experimental aircraft that flew Mach 9.6 in 2004, the release noted. The partnership will seek to commercialize high-speed flight technology, the release also said.

"Under the agreement, NASA will evaluate technological maturity and exchange subject matter expertise. Both organizations will collaborate on the development of aircraft concepts of operation, including analysis of high-Mach thrust performance, thermal management, integrated power generation, and cabin systems," Hermeus added.

In 2020, Hermeus was selected by the US Air Force to study how Hermeus' Mach 5 aircraft can support the objectives of the Presidential and Executive Airlift Directorate, whose fleet includes Air Force One, according to the release.

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US Wants Relations With Russia to Be Predictable, Stable Down the Line - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States wants relations with Russia to be predictable and stable down the line, US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Thursday.

"Our relationship with Russia will remain a challenge, but it's something that we're actually prepared for," Porter said during a telephone briefing. "But the goal of our relationship with Russia is one that we want to be predictable and stable down the line."

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UN Views Moscow Conference on Afghanistan as 'Very Important' - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations considers the negotiations held in Moscow to restart the peace process in Afghanistan, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Moscow hosted the conference on Afghanistan with the participation of Afghan representatives and the so-called extended troika, including Russia, China, Pakistan and the United States. The event was initially scheduled for only one day, but the negotiations will continue on Friday.

"All of these talks are of course very important and I think it's very important that all of these different concepts work in the same direction and we believe they are," Dujarric said when asked whether the decision not to send a UN representative to the talks was made because the organization did not view the meeting as being "essential."

Dujarric said it was "an issue of the format" due to which none of the two United Nations envoys on Afghanistan traveled to Russia's capital.

On Wednesday night, the UN Secretary-General announced the appointment of French diplomat Jean Arnault as his Personal Envoy on Afghanistan and Regional Issues. The United Nations already has a Special Representative in Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, whose work will continue in cooperation with Arnault, according to Dujarric.

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UN Special Envoy Unable to Travel to Myanmar, Will Go to Region Instead - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy on Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener is unable under the current circumstances to visit the country, but plans to travel to the region to engage Myanmar's neighbors as part of her efforts to calm the situation amid the military coup, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said during a press briefing on Thursday.

"A visit to the country under the current circumstances is not yet possible, as highlighted during the Special Envoys consultations with various key stakeholders. She is continuing to evaluate openings. Meanwhile, the Special Envoy will aim to engage Myanmar's neighboring countries through a regional visit," Dujarric told reporters.

The spokesman said no date has yet been set for the regional visit, but Schraner Burgener would like to dispatch "as soon as practicable."

The Special Envoy will seek to speak to as many of Myanmar's neighbors as would be possible, including the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to set the stage for dialogue and return to democracy in Myanmar, Dujarric added.

The United Nations said earlier in the day, the number of peaceful protesters killed by security forces since the February 1 seizure of power has climbed to about 200.

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"I'll have to get back to you if that is something we are entertaining... I don't have anything to report to you. And in terms of a future meeting, the president will of course be in Georgia tomorrow and quite busy," Psaki said when asked about Putin's offer. "The President already had a conversation with President Putin even as there are more world leaders that he has not yet engaged with, and we engaged with Russian leaders, members of the government at all levels."

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Continued Testing Delays Block F-35 Program Transition to Full-Rate Production - Report

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Failure by the US Defense Department's F-35 program office to create a flight simulator delayed the beginning of full-rate production of the fifth-generation aircraft for the second consecutive year, the General Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Thursday.

"Since August 2020, program officials have been working on a new plan to insure the simulator works as intended," the report said. "Until they finalize the plan and fix the simulator, the next production milestone date - which would formally authorize DOD's [Department of Defense's] transition from development to full production - remains undetermined."

The report said a simulator is needed to replicate complex test scenarios that can not be created in a real-world environment, but the Defense Department has failed to produce one. The GAO report also faulted the F-35 program for repeated delays in plans to upgrade the aircraft's hardware and software - a modernization effort known as "Block 4."

"The DOD [Department of Defense] routinely underestimated the amount of work needed to develop "Block 4" capabilities, resulting in additional schedule delays," the report said.

The F-35 is the most expensive weapons program ever, with program procurement and sustainment costs expected to top \$1.6 trillion for 3,300 aircraft planned for the United States and its allies, according to GAO.

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SolarWinds Hack Affected Networks Outside US - FBI Official

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The hacking attack against the Texas-based computer company SolarWinds affected several networks outside the United States though is believed to have predominantly targeted US-based assets, FBI Cyber Division Acting Assistant Director Tonya Ugoretz said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"Based on what we have seen thus far the majority of the activity appears to have been directed at the United States. However we are aware of instances [regarding] information shared with us from foreign partners that some of their networks were affected as well," Ugoretz told the US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

US officials have alleged that Russian hackers are likely behind the massive cyberattack that targeted at least nine US federal agencies and 18,000 private companies. The suspects reportedly embedded malware in updates and patches issued by SolarWinds, which supports government data, to penetrate networks in search for sensitive information.

Russia has denied the allegations saying they are groundless.

Ugoretz characterized the hacking attack against SolarWinds as an espionage operation. "The intelligence community in the Unified Coordination Group that is coordinating the response to this incident has said in its public statements that we assess that the intent of the adversary behind this activity was for espionage purposes to obtain information that would further their insight and their activities," she said.

The Biden administration has vowed to respond to the SolarWinds hacking attack.

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White House Says US Will Not Rely on Sanctions Alone to Deal With Russia, Has More Tools

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The US administration will not rely on sanctions alone in trying to influence Russia's behavior as President Joe Biden has a range of alternative tools at his disposal, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Thursday.

"I don't think we would rely on sanctions alone... There are a range of tools at the disposal of any president, seen and unseen. And I am just not going to get ahead of the process of what considerations are underway," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

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UN Views UK's Decision to Raise Nuclear Arsenal Cap Inconsistent With Disarmament Aim

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations believes the announcement by the United Kingdom to increase its nuclear arsenal stockpile is inconsistent with the country's disarmament commitments, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"While the United Kingdom continues to support the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons and many efforts to achieve it, we feel that this announcement is not consistent with the disarmament commitments of all nuclear weapons states have undertaken, nor is it consistent with commitments under the consensus outcome from the 2010 NPT [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons] Review Conference," Dujarric said.

At the Review Conference, NPT states agreed to undertake further efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate all nuclear weapons and move towards an overall reduction in the global stockpile of all types of such weapons.

London on Tuesday made public its new defense and foreign policy strategy, which mentions increasing the UK nuclear weapons stockpile to 260 warheads, reversing the government's previous plans to reduce it to 180 by mid-2020s.

The United Nations has already expressed its concern about the UK's announcement, stating on Tuesday the decision could damage global stability.

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Biden to Nominate Ex-Astronaut Bill Nelson as Next NASA Chief - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden plans to nominate former astronaut and Senator Bill Nelson to be the next NASA administrator, the *Washington Post* reported on Thursday.

The announcement may come as early as Friday, the report said citing sources familiar with the matter.

Nelson, 78, flew to space in 1986. During his service as US senator in 2001-2019, he oversaw NASA's space programs in Congress.

Nelson was a key supporter of Biden's presidential campaign last year, the report added.

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US Warns Any Entity Involved in Nord Stream 2 Pipeline Risks Being Sanctioned- State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The US State Department is warning companies involved in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that they are at risk of being sanctioned and should abandon their work immediately, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"The Biden Administration is committed to complying with that legislation," Blinken said in a press release. "The Department reiterates its warning that any entity involved in the Nord Stream 2 pipeline risks US sanctions and should immediately abandon work on the pipeline." The Biden administration is closely monitoring efforts to complete the pipeline and evaluating the entities involved in the Nord Stream 2 project, Blinken said.

Earlier this month, a group of US House Republicans sent Blinken a letter urging the Biden administration to submit to Congress new sanctions designations related to the Nord Stream 2 as soon as possible rather than wait until May 17, when the current 90-day reporting period ends.

Nord Stream 2 is a joint venture of Russian energy company Gazprom and five European partners, aimed at the construction of a twin pipeline to deliver Russian gas to Germany beneath the Baltic Sea. The project is a target of criticism and sanctions by United States, which calls it a threat to energy security of Europe and Ukraine.

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House Republican Leader Says Biden Ignoring Requests to Discuss Border Situation

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has not responded to Republican requests to discuss the crisis on the US southern border, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said on Thursday.

The migrant surge at the US-Mexico border is expected to hit a 20-year high, Homeland Security Department officials said this week, with encounters up more than 170% in February. "I still have not received a response from him... we can't even have a meeting on the border," McCarthy told reporters.

McCarthy said he had led a delegation of Republican members of Congress to security centers on the US land border with Mexico earlier this week and found the agents there were overworked, swamped by a tidal wave of illegals attempting to enter the United States, 10 percent of whom were testing positive for COVID-19.

Commenting on the president's earlier promises to cooperate with the Republicans in Congress, McCarthy said, "I haven't seen any of that."

McCarthy said the Democrats' \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief package included zero funding to help agents on the border who are spread too thin. US border authorities, he added, currently held an unprecedented 13,000 migrant children in custody and the mass influx of illegals across the US-Mexico border showed no sign of stopping.

The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) will utilize a convention center in Dallas, Texas, to hold asylum-seeking migrant children who are arriving in overwhelming numbers at the southern border, a spokesperson told Sputnik on Tuesday.

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US Assessing How to Loan Doses of AstraZeneca Vaccine to Mexico, Canada - White House

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is evaluating how to loan doses of AstraZeneca vaccine to Mexico and Canada, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We are assessing how we can loan doses. It's our aim, it's not fully finalized yet," Psaki said. "I can confirm that we have 7 million releasable doses available of AstraZeneca... 2.5 million of those we are working to finalize plans to land those to Mexico and 1.5 million to Canada."

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White House Says Biden Does Not Regret Calling Putin 'Killer'

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden does not regret calling Russian President Vladimir Putin a killer, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"No," Psaki said, when asked whether Biden regrets calling Putin a killer. "The president gave a direct answer to a direct question."

Moscow recalled its US ambassador over the comments, which the Russian embassy said were ill-considered and have endangered relations between the two countries.

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US Ambassador Remains in Moscow, Continues Engagement With Russian People - White House

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan remains in Moscow and continues to stay engaged with the Russian people, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"Our Ambassador [John] Sullivan remains in Moscow," Psaki said. "We remain engaged and he remains engaged as is our team on the ground with the Russian people. We continue to believe that diplomacy is the first step and should always be the first step and should be our objective as we pursue all relationships even with our adversaries. You know, we are hopeful that that will continue to be the case."

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Biden Admin Confident It Can Find Ways to Cooperate With Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's administration is confident that it can find ways to cooperate with Russia and Russian President Vladimir Putin, despite recent tensions between the two countries, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"President Biden and President Putin certainly have different perspectives on their respective countries and how to approach engagement in the world, but where they agree is that we should continue to look for ways to work together, as was noted in part of President Putin's comments," Psaki said. "There are areas of mutual interest - New START, which we just extended for 5 years is an example of that. We are confident that we can continue to look for ways where there is mutual interest, mutual national interest. But the president is not going to hold back, clearly when he has concerns, whether it is with words or actions."

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US Warns Any Entity Involved in Nord Stream 2 Pipeline Risks Being Sanctioned- State Dept.

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NATO Surveillance Aircraft, Service Members Join Nevada Red Flag Exercise - Air Force

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Early warning surveillance used for NATO operations are participating in US Red Flag countering threats military exercises being conducted at the Nellis Air Base in Nevada, also popularly known as Area 51, the US Air Force said in a report on Thursday.

"Service members from seven NATO member nations are at Nellis Air Force Base, supporting Red Flag 21-2," the Air Force News Service (AFNS) said. "The detachment operates a Boeing 707 derived E-3A Airborne Warning and Control System, or AWACS, aircraft equipped with a state-of-the-art long-range radar."

The AWACS has the capability to cover a surveillance area of more than 120,000 square miles, the size of Poland and the exercise is being used to test and sharpen the abilities of the NATO crew members in countering threats while building a cohesive protocol for real-world events, the report explained.

"We supply coordination and communication between the flying elements. We supply passive detection and radar. Lastly, we supply the needed knowledge of Airborne Early Warning, so aircrews can learn how to utilize our abilities to the greatest extent," German Air Force Captain Christoph Zurman said in the report.

Red Flag exercises seek to increase the interoperability of US and allied forces to create problem-solvers with the ability to correct decision-making under pressure and the NATO E-3A AWACS provides battle management and command and control to Red Flag 21-2 and has participated in all of the mission set, the report said.

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UN on Biden's Remarks on Putin: We Always for Promotion of Good Relations Among Countries

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric on Thursday said the organization supports the promotion of good and open relations among countries, especially those at the UN Security Council, following US President Joe Biden's harsh remarks about Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"We are always for the promotion of good and open relations between the world's countries and especially the Security Council's permanent members," Dujarric said in a press briefing.

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Airlines Operating in US Carry 62% Fewer Passengers in 2020 - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 – Passengers on US airlines and foreign carriers that operate in the United States fell 62 percent in 2020 from a year earlier, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) said on Thursday.

"US airlines and foreign airlines serving the US carried 398 million systemwide (domestic and international) scheduled service passengers in 2020, 62% fewer than in 2019 when the record high of 1.1 billion annual passengers was reached," BTS said in a press release.

Domestic and international air travel plunged following the early 2020 onset of the COVID-19 crisis, with similar declines reported globally by the International Air Transport Association. US carriers reported 336 million passengers, down 59percent from 2019, while foreign carriers reported 63 million passengers on flights to and from the US, down 74 percent, the release said. With the introduction of COVID-19 vaccines, US airlines have lately reported a surge in reservations for summer travel, mainly for tourism and personal reasons, while business travel remains depressed.

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UPDATE: Biden, Harris to Visit Atlanta Friday Following Spa Shooting - White House

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris will head to Atlanta on Friday following a mass shooting at a spa there, the White House announced in a release.

"Tomorrow, the President and the Vice President will travel to Atlanta, Georgia," the release said on Thursday. "Given the tragedy in Georgia on Tuesday night, President Biden and Vice President Harris will postpone the evening political event in Georgia for a future date."

The White House noted that Biden and Harris will meet with Asian-American leaders to discuss the attacks and threats against their community as well as will meet with other local leaders. Biden and Harris will visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to get an update from medical experts on the fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

On Tuesday, at least eight people were shot dead at massage parlors around the Atlanta metropolitan area. Police have taken the suspected gunman, 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long, into custody.

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Canada's Safety Chief Says Iran Jet Crash Report 'Raises More Questions Than Answers'

TORONTO, March 18 (Sputnik) - Iran's investigation into the downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet is sparse and raises more questions than answers, Canadian Transportation Safety Board (TSB) Chair Kathy Fox said on Thursday.

Iran's Civil Aviation Organization published a report on Wednesday in which it concluded that Ukrainian International Airlines flight 752 (PS752) was brought down inadvertently by an Iranian missile after being mistaken for a hostile target.

"We believe that the final report issued by Iran yesterday is incomplete. It raises more question that it answers," Fox told reporters in Ottawa.

Fox said that Iran's conclusion offers a "plausible" explanation of what occurred but stressed that Iranian investigators did not provide evidence to support this determination.

Fox, along with the TSB's lead investigator in the probe, Ewan Tasker, said the Iran's government's structure and actions undermined the credibility of the investigation, citing the Iranian Ministry of Roads and Urban Development's control over the Civil Aviation Organization and decision to withdraw the country's military from the scope of the investigation.

The TSB chair added that the report was short on recommendations to ensure that such an accident does not occur again and criticized Tehran for not disclosing what changes were implemented as part of the Iranian military's review of the accident.

Iranian investigators had said that military actions fall outside of Annex 13 jurisdiction, a point Fox disagreed with.

While acknowledging that Iranian investigators provided more access than they were entitled to, Fox protested that Canadian investigators received less access than what was requested and called for a review of International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) protocols to improve credibility of future safety reports.

The Association of Families of Flight PS752 Victims, a Canadian-based not-for-profit corporation, in a statement on Wednesday called Iran's report a set of "fabrications and a continuation of a lie," alleging that the airliner was shot down intentionally.

The TSB chair said the agency cannot assign blame or legal culpability. Tasker added that Iran made no effort to obstruct the investigation but noted that removal of the military from the scope of the investigation leaves many questions unanswered.

Iranian officials have not publicly commented on Canada's claims.

Ukrainian International Airlines flight PS752 crashed shortly after takeoff from Tehran after being shot down by the Iranian military. The passengers were mostly Canadian and Iranian nationals and nine Ukrainian crew members.

The Iranian military said it was on high alert at the time of the accident, which happened hours after it fired missiles at two US bases in Iraq in retaliation for the drone strike that killed top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani.

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US Senate Confirms Xavier Becerra as Biden's Secretary of Health and Human Services

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday confirmed Xavier Becerra as the next Secretary of Health and Human Services.

The former Attorney General of California was confirmed for the new position in a 50-49 vote.

Becerra is the first Latino to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.

Becerra will face the task of dealing with an influx of migrant children at the US southern border and the novel coronavirus pandemic, among other issues.

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Georgia Man Charged With \$1.5M In COVID-19 Relief Funds Fraud - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Christopher Hayes, a resident of Georgia, has been charged with an attempted COVID-19 food assistance fraud in the amount of \$1.5 million, the US Department of Justice said in a release on Thursday.

"Christopher A. Hayes made an initial appearance on federal charges of making a false claim to the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP)," the release said. "In total, Hayes attempted to obtain over \$1.5 million in COVID-19 relief funding."

The Justice Department said Hayes applied for Agriculture Department's CFAP relief funds and falsely claimed he lost livestock at his commercial farming operation while in reality he did not own any and did not have losses associated with any livestock.

Hayes is also charged with submitting a fraudulent Internal Revenue Service Form 7000, which allows employers to request an advance payment of small and mid-size business refundable tax credits to reimburse them for the cost of providing paid sick and family leave wages to employees, the release said.

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Biden, Harris to Visit Atlanta Friday Following Spa Shooting - White House

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Biden Orders US Flags Flown at Half-Staff to Honor Victims of Atlanta Spa Shooting

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday ordered American flags to be flown at half-staff upon all public building across the country and abroad over the recent shootings in the state of Georgia.

At least eight people were shot dead late Tuesday at massage parlors around the Atlanta metropolitan area in the US state of Georgia. Police have taken the suspected gunman, 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long, into custody.

"As a mark of respect for the victims of the senseless acts of violence perpetrated on March 16, 2021, in the Atlanta Metropolitan area, by the authority vested in me as President of the United States by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, I hereby order that the flag of the United States shall be flown at half-staff at the White House and upon all public buildings and grounds, at all military posts and naval stations, and on all naval vessels of the Federal Government in the District of Columbia and throughout the United States and its Territories and possessions until sunset, March 22, 2021," Biden said in a proclamation.

Biden also said in the proclamation that he direct that the flag should be flown at half-staff for at all US embassies, legations, consular offices, and other facilities abroad, including all military facilities and naval vessels and stations.

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US House to Vote on Legislation Giving Legal Status to Undocumented Residents - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Two pieces of legislation headed for a vote in the US House of Representatives later on Thursday will remove the threat of deportation on undocumented immigrants, including farm workers and so called "dreamers" - adults who were illegally brought to the United States as children, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said.

"For us this is a day not only of passing legislation but a cause for celebration," Pelosi told a news conference on Thursday.

The American Dream and Promise Act would create a path to citizenship for millions of dreamers while a second bill, the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, would establish a path to legal status for agricultural workers.

President Joe Biden has pledged to create a path to citizenship for all long-term undocumented immigrants - a population estimated at about 11 million - and Tuesday's vote will mark an initial legislative push by Congress to meet that objective.

US Congressman Jim Costa said the two bills would protect about half of the nation's undocumented residents from the threat of deportation.

Prospects for Senate passage are considered dim because approval would require votes from at least ten Republicans, many of whom have panned the Biden proposal as "blanket amnesty. Moreover, effort comes amid a new surge of illegal migrants crossing at the southern US border, especially unaccompanied children who are now being held in detention centers inherited from the Trump administration.

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UNSC Concerned Terrorists May Exploit Lack of Progress in Yemen Peace Process - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, March 18 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council said in a statement on Thursday that it is concerned the lack of progress in the Yemen peace process could be exploited by terrorists.

"[The Members of the UN Security Council] expressed concern that a lack of progress in the peace process could be exploited by terrorists in Yemen," the statement said.

The UN Security Council condemned the Houthis' escalation in the Marib governorate that "threatens efforts to secure a political settlement" and cross-border attacks against Saudi Arabia and stressed the need for de-escalation by all.

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US Senator to Visit Ethiopia, Convey Biden's Concerns on Tigray Crisis - White House

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - US Senator Christopher Coons will head to Ethiopia at the request of President Joe Biden to convey the United States' concerns over the ongoing crisis in the Tigray region, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"Senator Christopher Coons is traveling to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to meet with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali at President Biden's request," Sullivan said in a statement. "Senator Coons will convey President Biden's grave concerns about the humanitarian crisis and human rights abuses in the Tigray region and the risk of broader instability in the Horn of Africa."

Sullivan added that Coons will also consult with the African Union on how to promote the region's shared interests in peace and prosperity.

Fighting in the province of Tigray broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party - the Tigray People's Liberation Front - of attacking a regional military base to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia.

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Google to Invest \$7Bln in Offices, Data Centers Across US in 2021

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Google plans to invest more than \$7 billion in offices and data centers across the United States in 2021, company's CEO Sundar Pichai said in a statement on Thursday.

"We plan to invest over \$7 billion in offices and data centers across the US and create at least 10,000 new full-time Google jobs in the United States this year. This includes investing in communities that are new to Google and expanding in others across 19 states," Pichai said.

Google's plan includes investing over \$1 billion in offices in the Bay Area and adding thousands of roles in Atlanta, Washington DC, Chicago and New York, the statement said.

Pichai also added that besides new offices and jobs, Google will be investing in data center expansions in the US states of Nebraska, South Carolina, Virginia, Nevada and Texas.

According to Google's 2020 US Economic Impact Report cited in the statement, Google Search, Google Play, YouTube and Google advertising tools provided \$426 billion of economic activity to more than 2 million businesses, nonprofits, creators and developers in the United States in 2020.

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US Nuclear Power Tops Coal Generated Electricity for First Time in 2020 - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Electricity generated at US nuclear power plants topped power produced from coal for the first time in 2020, reflecting a multi-year decline in the use of coal, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in a report on Thursday.

"Last year marked the first time that coal was not the largest or second-largest source of annual electricity generation in the United States since at least 1949," the report said.

US coal-fired electricity generated a total of 774 million megawatthours (MWh) in 2020, which is less than both natural gas-fired (1.6 billion MWh) and nuclear-powered generation (790 million MWh), the report said.

Coal-fired electricity generation in the United States has steadily decreased since 2008 as utilities retire old coal plants while converting newer facilities to other fuels, especially natural gas, the report added.

In the near term, however, coal is expected to top nuclear as an electricity source as rising natural gas prices make coal more cost competitive, according to the report.

In 2020 and 2021, the report predicted US coal-fired electricity generation will actually increase, bucking a long-run trend.

Reducing the use of coal is a prominent target of the Biden administration to combat climate change, while safety concerns continue to limit construction of emission free nuclear plants as older facilities retire.

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Crimea to Welcome American Tourists Once Pandemic Over - Russian Embassy in US

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Crimea looks forward to welcoming American tourists on the Peninsula once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, the Russian embassy in the United States said on Thursday.

"We congratulate Crimeans of all ethnicities on the 7th anniversary of Crimea's reunification with Russia! The Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol top the list of the most dynamically developing regions of the Russian Federation," the embassy said in a statement. "As soon as the pandemic is defeated, we will welcome American tourists on the peninsula. By the way, the Crimean Bridge has made it much easier to travel there by car or train."

On March 16, 2014, Crimea rejoined Russia after over 95 percent of voters backed the move in a referendum, which followed a violent power change in Ukraine. Two days later, an agreement on Crimea's accession to the Russian Federation was signed. Since 2015, March 18 is an official holiday on the peninsula.

The majority of Western countries and Ukraine refuse to recognize the results of the referendum and have imposed sanctions on Russia. Moscow insists that the referendum was conducted in compliance with international law and democratic procedures. According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, the issue of the peninsula's territorial belonging is "historically closed."

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US Jobless Claims Rise 6% on Week Amid COVID-19 Challenge - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - Some 770,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, or about 6 percent above the previous week, demonstrating the job market's continued challenge in turning the corner with the coronavirus pandemic, Labor Department data showed Thursday.

"In the week ending March 13, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 770,000, an increase of 45,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release. "The previous week's level was revised up by 13,000 from 712,000 to 725,000." Economists polled by US media had forecast just about 700,000 jobless claims filings for last week.

The unemployment rate also rose for the first time in months, to 3.0 percent, although the rise itself was just 0.1 percent from the previous week.

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic a year ago, the lowest unemployment claims had gotten down to in a week was 711,000 in the week to November 19.

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

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

Some economists, however, pointed to the continued drop in continuing jobless weekly claims as a sign that the labor was improving, albeit incrementally. Continuing weekly claims — reported with a one-week lag — slid to 4.12 million for the week ended March 13, from 4.14 million during the week to March 6.

And while the sheer number of claims for last week was higher than expected, "it is lower than the month ago level of 834,000," ForexLive economist Greg Michalowski said in a post.

A year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring jobs growth remains one of the biggest challenges of US policymakers.

The US jobs report for February showed annual unemployment stood at 6.2 percent versus the 3.5 percent reported at the end of 2019.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Wednesday the US central bank will likely keep interest rates at near-zero for the next two years until the annual employment rate fell to 4.0 percent or lower, denoting "maximum employment."

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US, ROK Commit to Boosting Deterrence Posture, Joint Readiness Drills - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, March 18 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea pledged to enhance their combined deterrence posture and keep up joint military exercises, despite Pyongyang's criticism of the drills, the two countries said in a joint statement after high-level talks on Thursday.

The statement came at the conclusion of so-called 2+2 talks between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and their South Korean counterparts, Chung Eui-yong and Suh Wook in Seoul.

"US officials reaffirmed the US commitment to the defense of the ROK and its extended deterrence using the full range of US capabilities. Both sides committed to strengthening the Alliance deterrence posture, and they reiterated the importance of maintaining joint readiness against all shared threats to the Alliance through combined training and exercises," the statement said.

On Tuesday, Kim Yo Jong, a senior official and sister of North Korea's leader, condemned the joint US-South Korean military drills as running contrary to Seoul's rapprochement efforts and warned Washington not to meddle "if it wants to sleep in peace for coming four years."

The joint statement said the US and South Korean ministers agreed that American troops in South Korea will continue to play a crucial role for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the region. The two sides committed to ensuring that they have the force posture and capabilities needed to meet common challenges.

The participants of the meeting underscored that North Korea remains a priority for the alliance, and pledged to maintain high-level talks as the Biden administration conducts an ongoing review of US policy on the peninsula.

The two nations also committed to expand collaboration in various areas including trade, health, non-proliferation, nuclear energy, COVID-19, combatting the climate crisis, space, and cybersecurity, according to the statement.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims at 770,000 Last Week - Labor Dept.

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