

**03/20/21 Friday**

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BioNTech Founder Says mRNA Tech Being Studied for Use in Cancer Vaccines  
by [Mary F.](#)

Scientist Özlem Türeci co-founded the German company BioNTech with her husband, Uğur Şahin. BioNTech, along with US pharmaceutical company Pfizer, won the race to develop the first COVID-19 vaccine authorized by the US Food and Drug Administration.

The BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine, which was found to be 95% effective in preventing COVID-19, uses a novel messenger RNA or mRNA technology.

Messenger RNA, or mRNA, is the set of instructions used by cells to make proteins. mRNA vaccines are a relatively new type of treatment that work by providing instructions to healthy cells to generate antibodies for a certain virus or bacterium.

Conventional vaccines, on the other hand, introduce a weakened or dead virus or bacterium into the body. This induces an immune system response, allowing the body to recognize and fight the pathogen in the future.

In an interview with the Associated Press, Türeci revealed that the mRNA technology used to develop the COVID-19 vaccine is also being used to develop cancer vaccines.

"We have several different cancer vaccines based on mRNA," Türeci, who is also BioNTech's chief medical officer, told the outlet, noting that the same mRNA principle used in the vaccine could be used to attack cancerous tumors.

"It pays off to make bold decisions and to trust that if you have an extraordinary team, you will be able to solve any problem and obstacle which comes your way in real time," Tureci added.

When asked by the outlet when cancer vaccines may be available, Tureci responded that "that's very difficult to predict in innovative development. But we expect that within only a couple of years, we will also have our vaccines [against] cancer at a place where we can offer them to people."

An international team of scientists at the MD Anderson Cancer Center are also [studying](#) whether mRNA technology can be used to prevent colorectal cancer from recurring.

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier this week awarded Türeci and her husband with the Order of Merit, one of the country's highest honors, for helping develop the live-saving COVID-19 vaccine, [Business Insider reported](#).

"You began with a drug to treat cancer in a single individual," Steinmeier told the scientists, AP reported. "And today we have a vaccine for all of humanity."

However, Türeci insisted that the vaccine development was based on collective effort.

"It's about the effort of many: our team at BioNTech, all the partners who were involved, also governments, regulatory authorities, which worked together with a sense of urgency. The way we see it, this is an acknowledgment of this effort and also a celebration of science," Türeci noted.

Tens of millions of people worldwide have received the BioNTech-Pfizer shot since December.

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Emirati Leaders Slam Netanyahu's Attempted 'Internal Electioneering' in UAE

by [Mary F.](#)

The UAE and Israel signed a normalization agreement on August 13, 2020 known as the Abraham Accords, rendering the UAE the third Arab country after Egypt in 1997 and Jordan in 1994, to formally formalize its relationship with Israel.

On Wednesday morning, Israeli public broadcaster Kan announced that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would fly to Abu Dhabi on Thursday, citing insiders from the prime minister's office.

With [Israeli legislative elections](#) taking place on March 23, Netanyahu has been name-dropping Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed in campaign stops, stating that, unlike his opponents, he is helping establish multi-billion-dollar UAE investment projects in Israel. Last week, the UAE announced it would be establishing a \$10 billion investment fund with strategic sectors in Israel, including energy, manufacturing, water, space, healthcare and agri-tech. However, an unidentified official from the UAE has criticized Netanyahu's apparent use of Abu Dhabi as a stop on the campaign trail for political gain.

"The UAE signed the Accords for the hope and opportunities they provide our people, not individual leaders," the unidentified Emirati official told CNN on Thursday.

"Personalizing and politicizing the Accords in this way demeans the historic achievement. The UAE will not go down that road," the source added.

Outgoing UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash also slammed Netanyahu's actions, calling them "internal electioneering."

"The purpose of the Abrahamic Accords is to provide a robust strategic foundation to foster peace and prosperity with the State of Israel and in the wider region," presidential adviser and outgoing Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash tweeted on Wednesday. "The UAE will not be a part in any internal electioneering in Israel, now or ever."

Several hours after Israeli public radio announced that Netanyahu would be visiting the UAE on Thursday, Netanyahu appeared on the station to shut down those reports, as well as to discuss additional normalization deals with Arab states.

"There are four more historic agreements around the corner, which I intend to deliver,"

Netanyahu noted. "I will not travel to Abu Dhabi before the election; the reports that I would go are spin, I don't know who initiated them. I will go there later."

The UAE is not the only Arab country to normalize diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.

Relations between Bahrain and Israel were also normalized in September 2020. Bahrain normalized relations with the Jewish state on October 23, 2020. In December 2020, Morocco also normalized ties with Israel.

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Jewish Group to Ship 650 Pounds of Matzah to Gulf States for Passover  
by [Mary F.](#)

Matzah is an unleavened flatbread part of Jewish cuisine and an important component of Passover festival, a Jewish holiday that will begin this year on March 27 and end on April 4. The religious holiday commemorates the freedom of the Israelites from the Egyptians.

The [Association of Gulf Jewish Communities](#), an organization for Jewish communities of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which the aim of building Jewish life in the region, will be importing 650 pounds of matzah ahead of Passover, [The Times of Israel reported](#). The matzah will be shipped to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, the UAE and Bahrain. The Jewish association will also be providing Passover resources to US troops in the Gulf region.

"It is very exciting to see such demand for Passover programming in the Gulf this year," Rabbi Elie Abadie, a Jewish leader in the UAE, told The Times of Israel.

The latest shipment comes after Israel signed normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain last year, opening the door for diplomatic ties between the countries. Following the normalization deals with Israel, Middle Eastern countries like the UAE have seen a [surge in Israeli tourists](#), prompting the UAE to establish more eateries that offer kosher food. The national rugby teams of Israel and the United Arab Emirates also had their first friendly game, dubbed the Abraham Accord Friendship Cup, in Dubai on Friday. Israel defeated the UAE in the match 33 to zero, [The Times of Israel reported](#).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) soccer club Al-Ain will also play Israel's Maccabi Haifa in two friendly matches in the near future, [The Times of Israel reported in February](#).

"[The agreement] will consolidate the policy of bridge-building and cooperation between the two major clubs in various fields including marketing, technical cooperation, investment, commercial activities, media and sport," Mohamed Thaaloob, chairman of the Al-Ain club investment company, said at the time.

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Pakistan Connects First Chinese-Designed Nuclear Power Plant to Electrical Grid  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) has boasted that the new domestically-designed Hualong One nuclear reactor "breaks the monopoly" of foreign nuclear power technology. The design is considered broadly comparable to Westinghouse's advanced AP-1000 reactor.

Pakistan connected its K-2 nuclear power plant to the electric grid on Thursday, the first of a new plant design to be built outside of China.

Pakistani energy minister Omar Ayub Khan [tweeted on Thursday](#) that the 1,100-megawatt Karachi Nuclear Power Plant Unit-2 (K-2) had been connected to the power grid, becoming Pakistan's most powerful nuclear plant.

PAEC said in a statement the plant was a gift to the nation for Pakistan Day, which is on March 23 and commemorates two separate but important events in Pakistani history: the Pakistani declaration of independence in Lahore in 1940 and its transition from British dominion to an independent Islamic Republic in 1956.

The plant is a pressurized water reactor of the HPR-1000 "[Hualong One](#)" design, the first to be turned on outside China. Four more Hualong One reactors are planned for the Karachi plant and another in Chashma, which will nearly double the number of nuclear power plants in Pakistan once they are completed.

CNNC hailed the achievement as a "major overseas market milestone," the [Global Times reported](#).

The Karachi daily paper [Dawn noted](#) that the other six existing nuclear power stations overseen by the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission together only produce 1,400 megawatts, meaning K-2 will nearly double Pakistan's nuclear electrical generation by itself, once full-powered up.

The third-generation reactor is among the world's safest, and Beijing sees the Hualong One reactor as playing a key part of [building energy independence](#) for the region via the Belt and Road Initiative. However, the design remains new - China only connected its first Hualong One reactor, the No. 5 unit at the Fuqing Nuclear Power Plant, to the grid in November 2020.

China's and Pakistan's economic cooperation is expansive, including coordination on [building subways](#), nuclear and [hydroelectric power](#) plants, railways, highways, and a port facility at Gwadar, among other projects. As of June 2020, the estimated value of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was \$87 billion, according to The [Times of India](#).

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Iran to Perform 'Cold Test' of Arak Heavy Water Plant to Prepare for 2022 Reactor Start by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Under the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran was allowed to operate several small nuclear facilities and produce small amounts of refined uranium, but was required to shut down and reconfigure its Arak facility to render it unable to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons.

Scientists are preparing for a "cold test" of the IR-40 heavy water reactor at Arak, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) said on Friday. The facility was formerly capable of producing enough weapons-grade plutonium for roughly two nuclear weapons per year, but Tehran agreed to redesign it as part of the 2015 nuclear deal.

AEOI spokesperson Behrouz [Kamalvandi told reporters](#) the test, which includes the startup of fluids systems and support systems, would begin soon after the Iranian new year, which begins on Sunday.

The test, he said "will be prelude to its full commissioning a year later. This means we have fulfilled a range of required tasks in the fields of fuel, storage, and etc."

Kamalvandi noted that “enrichment [of uranium] is among the AEOI’s most important activities, but the organization is actively at work in other sectors as well. Enrichment may have come under the spotlight due to political issues, but work is well under way in other sectors as well.” Once active, the reactor will produce isotopes for use in the medical and agricultural fields. [Heavy water](#), a rare and special type of water formed from deuterium or “heavy hydrogen” instead of regular hydrogen, is useful for a number of civilian purposes, such as research in the biological and biochemical fields and the production of tritium, the material used in self-powered lighting. However, it can also be used to produce weapons-grade plutonium from unrefined uranium or spent uranium fuel.

As a consequence, part of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Iran agreed to in 2015 mandated that the Arak plant be shut down and reconfigured so as to be unable to produce plutonium-239 to be used for a nuclear weapon.

In 2018, the US unilaterally pulled out of the deal, accusing Iran of violating its terms and reimposing the economic sanctions the JCPOA had lifted. However, the other parties to the agreement - the UK, France, Germany, European Union, Russia and China - dissented and remained in the deal, albeit still bowing to US demands to curb trade with Iran.

“Following America’s withdrawal, the work on redesigning the Arak reactor slowed down, but the Chinese continued [the job,] and we ourselves, besides the Chinese, tried to advance the project since Iran is the main entrepreneur after all,” Kamalvandi noted on Friday.

However, as the situation has persisted, Tehran has taken steps to reduce its commitments to the JCPOA in an attempt to pressure Washington into returning to the deal, increasing the [quality and quantity](#) of uranium it has refined, but not to high enough quality to produce a nuclear weapon. The Iranian government has disavowed interest in a nuclear weapon, saying it wants to build new nuclear power plants.

Earlier this week, the International Atomic Energy Agency ([IAEA](#)) [reported](#) that Iran had begun operating a new cascade of the advanced IR-4 centrifuges in a protected underground facility at the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant in violation of the deal. The new centrifuges can refine uranium about four times faster than the older IR-1 devices, but are far from the most efficient centrifuges Iran has been developing.

The new Biden administration, which took office in January, for continuing on the path laid out by his predecessor, Donald Trump. US President Joe Biden has insisted Tehran must be the first to return to the confines of the deal, while Iran has said it must be the US who goes first, since it was the party who broke the deal in the first place.

“The perception of the ruling party in America is that it can once again put pressure on Iran, but if they are wise enough, they have to do a calculation and see what all the pressure exerted by Trump brought about,” Kamalvandi said.

“They may be thinking that Iran is in a position of weakness and that may have been the reason why they are prolonging the [nuclear] issue,” he added. “Nevertheless, it is certain to us that our position is righteous and the future is guaranteed for us.”

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China's Top Diplomat After Talks With US in Alaska Says There Are 'So Many Major Differences'  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Biden administration's first summit with China, being held in Alaska, has seen the two sides competing over how their relationship will proceed, with Washington assuming an offensive position including new sanctions, while China has sought dialogue but refused to back down. After the second and final day of [talks in Anchorage](#), Alaska, Yang Jiechi, the Communist Party of China's foreign policy chief, told reporters the talks were candid, constructive, and beneficial, despite the posturing.

"But of course, there are still differences," Yang told China Global Television Network, adding that "the two sides should follow the policy of 'no conflict' to guide our path towards a healthy and stable trajectory moving forward."

Yang further noted that both nations should follow policies of non-confrontation and avoidance of conflicts.

Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who accompanied Yang to the talks, told CGTN that their side had made clear to the Americans that China takes its sovereignty very seriously and warned them not to "underestimate China's determination to defend its territory, to defend its people, and maintain its righteous interests."

Washington has criticized China's security policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, where Western-backed separatist forces have created chronic unrest, as well as its longstanding claim to rule Taiwan, an autonomous island ruled by the Republic of China that lost the civil war in mainland China in 1949, when the socialist People's Republic of China was formed. The US technically recognizes Beijing's claim to be the sole legitimate representative of China, but in reality is the primary backer of the Taiwanese government. Beijing says all of these are internal matters and not of Washington's concern.

The Chinese delegation [sharply criticized the hosting](#) Americans during the first day of talks, accusing them of violating the meeting's protocols by speaking well over their time limit and using their opening statements to attack various Chinese policies. On the other side, [US officials said](#) the Chinese appeared primarily concerned with "theatrics" and "grandstanding."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in his opening statement accused China of "threaten[ing] the rules-based order that maintains global stability."

In response, Yang said China does not "believe in invading through the use of force, or to topple other regimes through various means, or to massacre the people of other countries, because all of those would only cause turmoil and instability in this world," noting they are all things the United States does.

After the second day of talks, an unnamed senior US official told Reuters talks with China had given the US more information and "moved the ball forward," but noted there may be areas of potential cooperation with China, including in Korea, Afghanistan, Iran, and combatting climate change.

Going into the talks, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang urged the two sides to "have dialogue and exchanges based on mutual respect and equality," noting that "even if we cannot work things out anytime soon, such exchange of views will help boost trust and dispel misgivings." However, US State Department officials noted they did not see the Alaska summit as the beginning of a new mechanism or dialogue.

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A Challenger Appears: China's Geely Launches 'Zeekr' Luxury Electric Car Brand to Compete With Tesla

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China is already the world's largest car market, but with the government's concentrated effort to shift the economy to electric power derived from renewable sources, it is poised to dominate the world's electric car market as well. However, American and European firms are facing stiff competition from China's domestic carmakers.

Chinese automaker Geely plans to roll out a new brand of luxury electric vehicles (EVs) to compete directly with Tesla, which is trying to muscle its way into China's domestic car market. [According to Reuters](#), the new brand "Zeekr" will be part of Geely's forthcoming EV company Lingling Technologies, a potentially game-changing new firm that will market EVs separately from gas-powered vehicles.

Geely's founder and chairman, Chinese billionaire Li Shufu, told Reuters Zeekr would be "like Mercedes-Benz" - that is, up-market luxury cars sold from custom showrooms in downtown city areas for fixed prices. The same marketing tactic is used by California-based Tesla, which has attempted to enter China's massive auto market in recent years, including opening a gigafactory in Shanghai.

Geely also announced earlier this week it will be [opening a new](#) \$4.6 billion EV battery factory in Ganzhou with an annual manufacturing capacity of 42 gigawatts - roughly similar in size to a new EV battery plant [Volkswagen also announced](#) earlier this week, but larger than Tesla's 35-gigawatt Nevada battery factory.

Shanghai-based Nio is another Tesla competitor, producing a number of sedans and SUVs and successfully pioneering [battery-swapping technology](#), which Tesla has so far struggled to implement.

China is by far the world's largest market for electric vehicles, hybrid gas-electric cars, and fuel cell cars, with 1.2 million "new energy vehicles" hitting the road last year - more than half of the world total. The country has set the ambitious goal of [totally phasing out](#) new cars powered only by petroleum products by 2035, and already has the world's largest car-charging network to support the expansion.

SAIC's Hong Guang Minis have [well outpaced Tesla's](#) Model 3 this year, the world's best-selling electric car. Tesla sold 13,843 Model 3s in China in January, according [to the BBC](#), while SAIC sold nearly 26,000 of the Mini EVs, which at 28,800 yuan (\$4,465) cost just 11% what the Model 3 does at 249,900 yuan (\$38,300). The Model 3 is [Tesla's best-selling car](#) with 454,000 sold last year - 140,000 of them in China.

In its first 200 days on the market, SAIC sold more than 200,000 HGMs. The tiny cars are useful for zipping around town, but not zipping down the highway, so their direct competition with Tesla's supercharged roadsters is limited.

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#### Trump Overload - Political Cartoon

Although former US President Donald Trump took every opportunity to blast tell-all books authored by former officials who served under his administration, it seems as if the one-term leader may be jumping on the same train. Choo, choo!

Over the next few weeks, Trump will reportedly begin sitting down for at least a dozen interviews with a variety of authors interested in analyzing the inner workings of the presidency and of the former commander-in-chief himself.

Citing sources familiar with the developments, Politico [recently reported](#) that the growing number of book interviews “is so massive” that some individuals within the Trump inner circle fear it’s all just too much.

In a bid to avoid any potential stumbles, Trump is expected to sit for the interviews with senior adviser Jason Miller and spokesperson Margo Martin.

The question now remains: Will Trump have any material left for his own book about his time in the White House?

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#### Pentagon Chief Warns Forces Are Ready to ‘Fight Tonight’ After North Korea Blasts Regional Exercises

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Long-standing military drills between American and South Korean forces had recently been kept on pause for more than a year as officials sought to curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes COVID-19. The temporary halt proved beneficial for North Korea, which sees the annual regional exercises as a provocation.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin recently warned North Korea that American troops were ready to “fight tonight” after the nation’s leadership condemned the resumption of military exercises between Washington and Seoul.

During a joint [news conference](#) with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and South Korean counterparts, Austin told a panel that the Biden administration and the US military remained committed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, among other objectives.

“The United States remains fully committed to the defense of the Republic of Korea, using the full range of US capabilities, including our extended deterrent,” Austin told reporters, doubling down on Washington’s hope to denuclearize the peninsula.

“There is no daylight between us on this point.”

Austin further stated that the “importance of maintaining military readiness” remained one of the top focus points on his agenda. “Our force remains ready to fight tonight and we continue to make progress toward the eventual transition of wartime operational control to an ROK-commanded future combined forces command,” he said.

“While meeting all the conditions for this transition will take more time, I’m confident that this process will strengthen our alliance,” the Pentagon chief continued.

Austin’s commentary emerged just as Kim Yo Jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, urged the US to avoid “causing a stink” as Washington moved ahead with plans to resume military drills with South Korean forces.

“If [the US] wants to sleep in peace for [the] coming four years, it had better refrain from causing a stink at its first step,” Kim said, according to a [statement](#) obtained by Reuters correspondent Josh Smith.

In fact, Kim warned that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) may be forced to “take a special measure of resolutely abrogating even the north-south military agreement,” should the DPRK leadership feel so compelled.

North Korea has long believed that ongoing military drills between the US and South Korea are simply dress rehearsals for an invasion, with North Korea’s leader previously stating in January that talks with Washington would only restart if the exercises were canceled.

The latest round of exercises between the pair, however, went ahead on March 8, but were largely scaled back as a result of the pandemic and ongoing diplomatic overtures to the DPRK.

Talks between Washington and Pyongyang have remained at a stalemate ever since the February 2019 meeting between Kim Jong Un and former US President Donald Trump. At the time, the second historic meeting between the world leaders came to an abrupt end after the US failed to offer any sanctions relief.

Although the Biden administration has not yet offered a clear outline of its policy toward North Korea, it’s expected that the president will fall in line with many of the standings and policies tapped by Trump.

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Biden Condemns Atlanta Shootings, Urges Public to 'Speak Out' Against Anti-Asian Violence by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US President Joe Biden and US Vice President Kamala Harris have both traveled to Atlanta, Georgia, to meet with Asian American leaders in the wake of the deadly shooting rampage that targeted three massage parlors. Six of the eight victims were of Asian descent.

Biden and Harris met with leaders of the Asian American community in Georgia on Friday and denounced the Atlanta-area shootings that claimed the lives of eight individuals, including six Asian women.

After meeting with officials, Biden stated in a [televised address](#) that the American public needs to speak out against hate and violence, especially as the US has documented a surge in hate crimes against the Asian American community amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Hate and violence often hide in plain sight and are so often met with silence. That's been true throughout history," Biden told viewers. "But that has to change because our silence is complicity. We cannot be complicit. We have to speak out. We have to act."

Biden referred to the deadly shooting spree as being part of a "skyrocketing spike" in attacks against Asian Americans, stating that "they've been attacked, blamed, scapegoated and harassed. They've been verbally assaulted, physically assaulted, killed."

"It's been a year of living in fear for their lives," he stressed.

In fact, newly released data from nonprofit organization Stop AAPI Hate [revealed](#) earlier this week that some 3,800 anti-Asian hate incidents were reported amid the pandemic. The report found that some 68% of the documented attacks were against Asian women.

Although initial reports from law enforcement officials state that the Atlanta killings were driven by the shooter's alleged [sexual addictions](#), it is largely believed that the attacks were influenced more by anti-Asian sentiments. Investigators are still assessing whether the shootings were racially motivated.

"Whatever the motivation, we know this: Too many Asian Americans have been walking up and down the streets and worrying, waking up each morning the past year feeling their safety and the safety of their loved ones are at stake," Biden underscored.

"Hate can have no safe harbor in America. It must stop. It's on all of us together to make it stop." Speaking ahead of Biden, Harris stated in brief remarks that xenophobia, sexism and "racism [are] real in America and it always has been."

Without outright naming former US President Donald Trump, who repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus," Harris noted that "for the last year we've had people in positions of incredible power, scapegoating Asian Americans; people with the biggest pulpits spreading this kind of hate."

A Wednesday-published [study](#) by a group of researchers with the University of California, San Francisco, revealed that Trump's repeated use of the "Chinese virus" term prompted a sharp rise in anti-Asian hashtags being used on social media. Official found that netizens who used similar rhetoric were more than likely to use tags that were overtly racist.

At the time, Trump [rejected](#) any assertion that his decision to refer to the deadly virus as the "Chinese virus" or the "Wuhan virus" could prompt a dangerous sentiment toward the Asian American community.

Biden indicated during the address that he and Harris are both being "regularly updated" on the ongoing investigation.

In total, the Tuesday shooting claimed the lives of eight people. The suspected shooter, identified as 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long, remains in police custody and has been charged with eight counts of murder.

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US Judge Rejects Request to Postpone, Relocate Derek Chauvin Trial Out of Minneapolis by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The murder trial against Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer who has been charged with the in-custody death of George Floyd, came underway in early March, but has been hit with setbacks during jury selection proceedings. Recently, two jurors were dismissed over their inability to be impartial.

A judge in Minneapolis, Minnesota, ruled on Friday against granting a request by Chauvin's defense lawyers to both delay and relocate the murder trial, arguing that there is no region within the state that has not been subjected to details of the case.

In response to recently-filed defense motions, Minnesota's Hennepin County District Court Judge Peter Cahill informed the court that neither a change of venue and nor a continuance for the case would be beneficial for Chauvin's trial.

"Unfortunately I think the pretrial publicity in this case will continue no matter how long we continue it," Cahill [remarked](#) during pre-trial proceedings. "And as far as a change of venue, I do not think that would give the defendant any kind of a fair trial beyond what we are doing here today."

"I don't think there's any place in the state of Minnesota that has not been subjected to extreme amounts of publicity on this case," he underscored.

However, Cahill did acknowledge the impact of the city's [\\$27 million settlement](#) with the Floyd family, recalling how he was "shocked" when he became aware that two jurors had declared they could not be impartial in light of the hefty payout.

"I'll be very honest, when it was first brought up by the defense I thought they were overstating it," the judge said, adding, "I was a little shocked when we called back the seven of the nine jurors that had been seated ... and two of them basically said they could not be fair and impartial any longer."

The defense [first raised](#) concerns about the effects of the well-publicized settlement and the need to relocate the trial earlier this week, explaining to Cahill that the city's deal may cause jurors to hold prejudice against Chauvin.

Two days later, after jurors were questioned once again about how the settlement may affect their views, two individuals selected to serve in the jury box lamented they could not be unbiased moving forward. The pair indicated that the dollar amount of the settlement confirmed their beliefs about Chauvin's culpability.

Touching on additional defense motions, Cahill [also ruled](#) that jurors could hear evidence related to a drug-related arrest in May 2019 that involved Floyd. The ruling stipulates that officials would be able to present details from the 2019 arrest, so long as it pertains to Floyd's medical condition after an officer pointed a gun at him and took him into custody.

Evidence from the arrest could include body camera footage, Floyd's statements to paramedics and his blood pressure results, among other information. However, officials are forbidden from presenting any information of Floyd's emotional behavior. Similar to Floyd's fatal encounter with Chauvin, the Minnesota resident also called out for his mother during the 2019 arrest.

The day's proceedings later saw the 13th juror selected. At present, the jury is [composed of](#) seven white individuals and six people of color. Officials still need to still pick one more alternative.

Opening statements are expected to begin no earlier than March 29, and will be followed by testimony that could last for about four weeks. Chauvin has pleaded guilty to second-degree unintentional murder, second-degree manslaughter charges and third-degree murder. Other defendants in the case - J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao - have been charged with aiding and abetting murder and manslaughter. The three former officers are scheduled to be tried in August.

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White House: Biden 'Just Fine' After Falling on Air Force One Stairs, No Medical Attention Required  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, US President Joe Biden fell three times while attempting to board Air Force One ahead of a scheduled trip to Atlanta, Georgia. The stumble came amid growing questions regarding whether the commander-in-chief is fit for office.

The White House on Friday shrugged off any concerns about the US president's well-being, informing the public that Biden is "just fine," despite having a bit of a stumble when boarding Air Force One earlier in the day.

Kate Bedingfield, the White House communications director, issued a [statement](#) following the incident, stating that the commander-in-chief sustained no serious injuries during the trip-up. "I know folks have seen that President Biden slipped on his way up the stairs to AF1, but I'm happy to report that he is just fine and did not even require any attention from the medical team who travels with him," Bedingfield noted.

"Nothing more than a misstep on the stairs."

The White House official's remarks came moments after Karine Jean-Pierre, who serves as the White House deputy press secretary, [told reporters](#) on board the presidential plane that the president was "doing fine."

Jean-Pierre also informed the press pool that the day's strong winds had even caused her to nearly fall while ascended the steps.

Video footage of the Friday incident captured the 78-year-old Biden taking two missteps on the airstairs, where he briefly caught himself. However, he fell to his knees during his third attempt to recompose himself. Biden later appeared to check his left knee before scaling the steps again, but this time with both hands over the guardrails.

The misstep came days after Dr. Kevin O'Connor, a physician with George Washington University, released a three-page [medical summary](#) of Biden's health. In the report, O'Connor described the president as "healthy" and "vigorous" who is "fit to successfully execute the duties of the presidency."

The medical release itself comes amid increasing concerns that Biden is unfit for office, with many criticizing his failure to hold an official news conference after assuming the presidency. Earlier, a [poll](#) by Rasmussen indicated that half of those surveyed were "not confident" that Biden was "physically and mentally up to the job."

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Blunt Decision: White House Admits to Firing Employees With Past Marijuana Use  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

A Thursday report by The Daily Beast detailed that "dozens of young White House staffers have been suspended, asked to resign, or placed in a remote work program due to past marijuana use." Sources said some staffers felt US President Joe Biden's administration would not fire personnel over the recreational use of cannabis.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki took to social media on Friday to address rumors of the White House's marijuana policy and subsequent weeding out of recently-hired personnel.

"We announced a few weeks ago that the White House had worked with the security service to update the policies to ensure that past marijuana use wouldn't automatically disqualify staff from serving in the White House," [Psaki tweeted](#), originally linking to a February NBC News [article](#) on the previous announcement.

"As a result, more people will serve who would not have in the past with the same level of recent drug use," she added. Without directly speaking of the reports, Psaki detailed that "only five people who had started working at the White House are no longer employed as a result of this policy."

The White House press secretary issued a separate statement to the [Daily Beast](#), reiterating that "more people have the opportunity to serve than would not have in the past with the same level of recent drug use."

"While we will not get into individual cases, there were additional factors at play in many instances for the small number of individuals who were terminated," she concluded.

At the same time, one ex-White House staffer told The Daily Beast that "nothing was ever explained" on the one-on-one calls. According to the former staffer, they were "asked to resign." "The policies were never explained, the threshold for what was excusable and what was inexcusable was never explained," the individual alleged.

Many social media users reacted negatively to the report, and Psaki's confirmation of the weeding out of staffers with past marijuana use.

you can't work at the White House if you smoke weed, but if you're ok with black people being 4 times more likely than white people to get arrested for marijuana possession, despite same usage rates, you get to live in the White House. make it make sense

— Dilan Cook (@dilanpcook) [March 19, 2021](#)

Some netizens pointed out that it was odd how former US Presidents, like [Barack Obama](#) and [Bill Clinton](#), were able to admit to their marijuana use, but White House personnel are apparently being held to a different standard.

More recently, current Vice President Kamala Harris went on Power 105.1's "The Breakfast Club" and admitted that she smoked a joint "a long time ago," during her college days. She even quipped that she "did inhale," poking fun at Clinton's notorious claim that he "didn't inhale" when he tried marijuana.

While it's now known that five White House employees are "no longer employed as a result of this policy," it remains unknown how many personnel were suspended or ordered to work remotely.

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Trump's Niece Renews Sedition Accusations Against 45, Joins LGBTQ-Focused Super PAC by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Trump family feud has entered into its second chapter since former US President Donald Trump left the White House, with psychologist and author Mary Trump - 45's estranged niece - warning Americans in December that her uncle will "put considerable energy, as least as long as he's able to, into delegitimizing Biden's win and his administration."

LGBTQ+ and womens' rights-focused super PAC [LPAC announced](#) earlier this week that Mary Trump, author of the Donald Trump-based memoir "Too Much and Never Enough," is now the newest member of the national political organization's Board of Directors.

"Mary Trump has demonstrated thought leadership, media and political savvy over the last year as she has stormed the country with her insights and opinions," LPAC Board Chair Laura Ricketts said in the news release. "We couldn't be more excited to have her join us in building the power of our political action community and developing the next generation of LGBTQ women leaders."

LPAC's overarching mission is to get more female, LGBTQ+-identified politicians elected to public office. The national political organization has raised more than \$6.3 million in funding and endorsed over 150 candidates since being established in 2012.

Contributions from LPAC have helped the campaigns of Sens. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ), as well as Democratic Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

The release highlighted that Mary Trump, who has a PhD from the Derner Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies, is presently writing "The Reckoning," a book on the "trauma this country has suffered over the four years Donald Trump was in the Oval Office."

While being interviewed about her new position, Mary Trump appeared to mince no words about her uncle, [telling Politico](#) that Donald Trump and his administration almost destroyed democracy in the US.

"We came really close to losing our democracy — and I may sound melodramatic but it happens to be true," Mary Trump said Thursday. "I feel it's the beginning of the fight because we came so close to losing everything, and we're also faced with a situation in which there's this fight over the filibuster, and it's important we understand this is about representation across the board."

She told the outlet that, with her uncle out of office, the US can "move away from what has been one of the worst administrations in this country's history on almost every level."

While Donald Trump's presidency is in the past, Mary Trump has continued to rail against her uncle and his administration. Last week, the former US president's niece [told Insider](#) that she believes his permanent ban from Twitter is one of his biggest failures.

"I think that being banned from Twitter and having the [Professional Golf Association (PGA)] take their tournament away from his golf courses are probably the worst things that have happened to him in the last four years," she said. "How is he managing without Twitter? Because even he must realize that people really aren't paying attention to him in the same way." Mary Trump has also explicitly stated that her uncle and "147 elected republicans [sic]" engaged in sedition by paving the way for the January 6 storming of the US Capitol building.

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Biden Unlikely to Risk US Arms Sales by Insulting Saudis - Ex-Officials

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is unlikely to punish or even call Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman a "killer" over the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi because it would undermine US interests including arms sales to Riyadh, former security and intelligence officials told Sputnik.

Biden, during an interview with ABC News earlier this week, replied in the affirmative when asked if Russian President Vladimir Putin was a "killer." However, the US president refused to use the label to describe the Saudi crown prince despite the fact Biden's own intelligence agencies concluded that bin Salman was responsible for the murder and dismemberment of Khashoggi, a longtime critic of the Royal family.

Last month, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence published a declassified report saying that bin Salman approved an operation to assassinate Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey in October of 2018. Turkish authorities reported that a bone saw had been used to dismember the journalist's body.

The Trump administration was harshly criticized for not punishing Saudi Arabia over the Khashoggi affair. Then-President Donald Trump was also roundly excoriated after publicly admitting he did not want to put US arms sales at risk.

During his interview with ABC, Biden said he would not call the crown prince a killer because Saudi Arabia is a US ally. Biden also said Saudi Arabia is in the process of doing a "list of things" the United States expects them to do.

"I'm sure that number one on that list was to keep on buying megabuck weapons from us," former US Defense Department analyst Pierre Sprey told Sputnik.

Although the Biden administration paused arms shipments to the Saudis due to the war in Yemen, the restrictions only apply to "offensive" weapons. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in a March 15 report revealed that Saudi Arabia purchases nearly 25% of all US arms exports.

Retired US Army Colonel Doug Macgregor, a senior Pentagon adviser during the Trump administration, said Biden did not label bin Salman as a killer because he was not allowed to.

"His handlers did not tell him to accuse the Saudi Crown Prince," Macgregor said.

In his reaction to Biden's remarks, Putin said "it takes one to know one" and wished the US president "good health" while at the same time inviting him to publicly discuss bilateral issues as

early as on Friday or Monday. Biden said he is certain he and Putin will "talk at some point," but did not commit to any timeframe.

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov will leave Washington on Saturday to attend consultations in Moscow about correcting relations with the US after Biden's harsh comments about Putin.

Retired CIA analyst Raymond McGovern told Sputnik the comment about Putin was unprecedented in superpower relations and warned that a new "era in acrimony" had opened between the United States and Russia.

Former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Freeman put Biden's controversial comments in the context of the president's long history of public miscues.

"[Is was] not the first gaffe in Biden's long history of logorrhea - uncontrolled pouring out of the spoken word," Freeman concluded.

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Lawsuit to Revive Keystone XL Pipeline Has Solid Standing, Uncertain Outcome - Consultants

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - A lawsuit filed by 21 Republican-led US states seeking to revive the Keystone XL pipeline after it was blocked by President Joe Biden stands on solid legal grounds but the outcome of the legal battle is difficult to predict, US oil and gas consultants told Sputnik.

Keystone is an oil pipeline system that moves Alberta crude oil from the Canadian town of Hardisty to refineries and tank farms in Illinois, Oklahoma and Texas. The first three phases of the system are currently operational, however, the construction of the fourth phase, better known as Keystone XL, which is planned to transport oil to the US state of Nebraska, has caused a major uproar on both sides of the border.

Earlier this week, attorney generals from 21 Republican-led states filed a lawsuit against Biden over his cancellation of the Keystone XL pipeline project.

"The legal challenges are on very solid ground," Greg Lamberson, head of International Construction Consulting, told Sputnik. "Based on previous years of legal, technical, environmental challenges, there is no lawful nor technical basis for canceling the project. So, there is solid standing for the lawsuit."

However, Lamberson said some recent court rulings, or even their willingness to hear cases, has been puzzling, so how this new legal challenge will be decided is a "roll of the dice."

The lawsuit claims that Biden's order "cites no statutory or other authorization permitting the President to change energy policy," arguing that "the President lacks the power to enact his 'ambitious plan' to reshape the economy in defiance of Congress's unwillingness to do so."

Filed in the Southern District of Texas, the suit presents as plaintiffs the attorney generals of Texas and Montana in addition to Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, West Virginia and Wyoming.

Among the first batch of executive orders signed on inauguration day, Biden issued one that suspended the construction of the contentious Keystone XL pipeline project citing environmental concerns.

Doyle Sanders, an oil and gas pipeline engineer who also works as a consultant in the industry, told Sputnik the cancellation of the Keystone XL pipeline was a political action by the Biden administration that has a far-reaching economic impact on many US workers and suppliers. "While I am hopeful that the legal challenges will have positive impact on national consensus to support this project, the White House executive orders seem to be overriding common sense in this and other national concerns," Sanders added.

Sanders said he expects the court battles for these lawsuits will extend beyond the 2022 congressional elections that should overturn political control from Democrats.

The Keystone XL pipeline project was twice rejected by the Obama administration, but was backed by former President Donald Trump. In September, the US Supreme Court rejected a request from the Trump administration and the pipeline's parent company, TC Energy, to dismiss a lower court ruling blocking further construction of the pipeline because of a violation related to a water-crossing permit.

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Canada's Conservative Leader Vows Party Change Saying Trudeau Lapses Not Enough to Win

TORONTO, March 20 (Sputnik) - Canada's Conservative Party must change if it wants to govern again, leader Erin O'Toole said, noting that transgressions and scandals on the part of Prime Minister of Justin Trudeau are not enough for an election victory.

In the keynote address of the Conservative Party virtual policy convention, billed to be his last chance to make an impression on Canadians following an underwhelming six months since taking the party reins, O'Toole conceded that his party has lost two elections and gone through four party leaders in the past five years by "making the same arguments and hoping Canadians come around to our positions."

"We are never going to win over Canadians just by relying on Justin Trudeau to continue to disappoint. His scandals, as outrageous as they are, are never going to be enough to defeat him," O'Toole said on Friday. "Canada has changed. Our party has to change too."

During the speech, O'Toole unveiled his party's "Canada Recovery Plan," which entails recovering the one million jobs lost during the pandemic, balancing the budget over the next decade and enacting anti-corruption legislation to "end abuse by Liberal insiders."

O'Toole also used the national spotlight to appeal to would-be voters, saying that the traditionally labor-backed New Democrat Party no longer represents the interests of blue-collar and union workers and taking aim at the Bloc Quebecois party, in a pitch to the Quebec electorate, with which Conservatives have struggled in recent years.

However, the Conservative leader tempered speculations about a potential shift on the party's environmental policy, only going so far as to say that he is committed to protecting the environment.

Canada is more divided than ever, O'Toole warned, saying that a Conservative government in Ottawa is the best remedy against secessionist movements in Quebec and Western Canada. The Conservative Party convention comes at the turn of what promises to be a rollercoaster political cycle. Canada has twice been pushed to the brink of an election since the last federal campaign, held in October 2019, and there is strong speculation that an election will be triggered sometime in 2021.

At present, Canada's governing Liberal Party leads the federal vote intention with the support of 35 percent of respondents, ahead of the Conservatives by 5 percent, according to an aggregate of national polling numbers.

However, a recent Angus Reid Institute poll found that half of Canadians desire to see a change in leadership in Ottawa, although most oppose a spring election as the country battles the novel coronavirus pandemic.

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US Indicts 10 Iranians for Evading Oil Sanctions - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has indicted ten Iranian nationals for violating US oil sanctions against Iran, the Department of Justice said in a release.

"A federal criminal complaint unsealed today charges 10 Iranian nationals with running a nearly 20-year-long scheme to evade US sanctions on the government of Iran by disguising more than \$300 million worth of transactions - including the purchase of two \$25 million oil tankers - on Iran's behalf through front companies in the San Fernando Valley, Canada, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates," the release said on Friday.

In addition, a forfeiture complaint has been filed seeking a money laundering penalty of \$157.3 million, the release said.

The Justice Department said the defendants used the Hong Kong-based company Total Excellence to secretly buy two oil tankers on behalf of Iran that were used to ship oil in violation of US and EU sanctions.

The defendants used more than 70 front companies, money service businesses and exchange houses to disguise some \$300 million of transactions on Iran's behalf while being perfectly aware of the US sanctions on Iran throughout the conspiracy, the release said.

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US-China Talks Conclude With Both Sides Defending Interests, Finding Common Ground

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The high-level discussions between top US and Chinese diplomats in Alaska have concluded after both sides sparred on many issues, but also found common ground on other global matters.

"The strategic dialogue is direct, frank, and constructive... but there are so many major differences sitting between the two sides," China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi told reporters on Friday after wrapping up talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

Yang said the principles of no confrontation and no conflict should guide the US-China bilateral relations.

Yang also said China hopes the United States will not underestimate Beijing's determination to defend its territory and safeguard its people.

Blinken said the bilateral talks were very candid and both sides were at odds on topics that include Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and cyberspace. However, both sides found some common ground on matters concerning Iran, North Korea, Afghanistan, and climate change. Blinken added that they notified their Chinese counterparts that they are currently reviewing bilateral issues related to trade and technology.

The US delegation characterized the talks as "tough and direct" that provided them with an understanding of China's priorities and intentions. The diplomats also said the United States will continue to work with China going forward.

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#### Biden Calls for End of Violence Against Asian Americans

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he receives regular updates on the ongoing investigation into the shooting spree in Atlanta, Georgia, and called on Americans to speak out and act to stop violence against fellow countrymen of Asian descent. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris are on a visit to Georgia after eight people, including six Asian American women, were killed in a series of armed attacks on local spa salons.

"The investigation is ongoing and the Vice President and I are being regularly update by the Attorney General and Director of the FBI," Biden said in televised remarks on Friday. "We cannot be complicit, we have to speak out, we have to act."

Biden said whatever the motivation for the killings, too many Asian Americans have been attacked, scapegoated and harassed.

"They have been verbally assaulted, physically assaulted, killed. Documented incidents of hate against Asian Americans have seen a sky-rocketing spike over the last year, let alone the ones that happened and never get reported," he said.

Biden denounced silence in the face of violence as complicity and recalled that he signed an executive order to fight hate crimes while urging Congress to pass legislation on the issue.

"I am calling on Congress to pass and get to my desk the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act. Hate can have no safe harbor in America, it must stop. It's on all of us, all of us together to make it stop," Biden said.

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#### Wall Street Posts Weekly Loss as Major Indexes Wilt Amid High Bond Yields

NEW YORK, March 19 (Sputnik) - Wall Street on Friday posted a weekly loss as major US stock indexes wilted for the week in an environment of charging bond yields.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index led the losses, sliding 0.79 percent on the week. The Nasdaq actually rose 0.8 percent on Friday but that percentage gain was wiped out by Nasdaq declines from earlier in the week.

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. It has fallen more since the start of the year than rival US equity indices, the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the S&P500.

The S&P500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, fell 0.77 percent on the week after a flat finish on Friday.

The Dow, Wall Street's broadest stock indicator and comprising mostly industrial stocks, dipped 0.5 percent on the week after a decline of 0.7 percent on Friday.

Stocks finished the week lower as investors reacted with dismay to the Federal Reserve's decision not to ramp up bond buying to tamp down soaring yields that have hurt this year's rally in risk assets.

On Wednesday, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said the US 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 measures.

Reacting to Powell's comments, 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 Fed expectations and result in spiraling inflation, while the central bank insists on keeping interest rates at near zero.

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US Court Sentences Russian National Medvedev to 10 Years in Prison for Cybercrimes

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - A US court sentenced Russian national Sergey Medvedev to ten years in prison for his role as co-founder and administrator of online trading for fraud-related goods and services, the Justice Department said in a statement.

"Sergey Medvedev, aka "Stells," "segmed," and "serjbear," 33, of Russia, pleaded guilty in the District of Nevada to one count of racketeering conspiracy in June 2020 and was sentenced today to 10 years in prison," the statement said on Friday.

According to court documents, Medvedev was a co-founder of Infracred Organization, described as "a transnational cybercrime enterprise engaged in the mass acquisition and sale of fraud-related goods and services, including stolen identities, compromised credit card data, computer malware, and other contraband."

The Justice Department said the Infracred Organization victimized millions of people in all 50 US states and caused more than \$568 million in financial losses.

From November 2010 until Infracred was taken down by law enforcement in February 2018, Medvedev was an active participant in the Infracred online forum, operating an "escrow" service to facilitate illegal transactions among Infracred members, it said.

For several years, Medvedev served as Infracred's administrator, handling day-to-day management, deciding membership, and meting out discipline to those who violated the enterprise's rules, the Justice Department also said.

The court also sentenced to five years in prison Marko Leopard, a 31-year-old citizen of Macedonia for his role in Infracred, the Justice Department added.

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China Hopes US Will Not Underestimate Beijing's Resolve to Defend Itself- Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - China hopes the United States will not underestimate Beijing's determination to defend its territory and safeguard its people, Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters.

"We have reiterated to the United States once again sovereignty and territory are principle issues. On these issues, we hope the United States is not going to underestimate China's determination to defend its territory, to defend its people, and maintain its righteous interests," Wang said during a press conference on Friday.

Earlier in the day, Yi and China's Director of the Office of the Central Committee for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi concluded bilateral talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

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Texas Governor Says Conditions at Federal Care Facilities for Migrant Children 'Inhumane'

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has failed to provide safe and humane conditions at two recently-opened facilities in the US state of Texas that are holding migrant children, Texas Governor Greg Abbott said.

"The Biden administration has been an abject failure when it comes to ensuring the safety of unaccompanied minors who cross our border," Abbott said in a press release on Friday. "The conditions unaccompanied minors face in these federally run facilities is unacceptable and inhumane."

Abbott said the water at the federally run facility for migrant children in the city of Midland was not proven safe prior to opening.

In addition, Abbott said there is an outbreak at the federal care facility housing migrant children in the Texas city of Carrizo Springs.

Texas health officials have been deployed to investigate and contain the outbreak at the Carrizo Springs facility and have notified the facility in Midland to address the water issues, Abbott said.

The US Health and Human Services (HHS) department said there are about 769 migrant teenagers in the Carrizo Springs facility. The agency noted that 121 children have been released so far and all of the migrants are male.

HHS said that as of March 15 there are about 9,200 migrant children under the care of the US government.

Data from US Customs and Border Protection shows 9,457 unaccompanied migrant children were apprehended at the southern border in February, which is a substantial increase from the 5,858 unaccompanied migrant children apprehended in January. At least 29,729 migrant children have been apprehended at the US-Mexico border in the period from October to February. Overall, 100,441 migrants were apprehended entering the United States illegally in the month of February.

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PREVIEW - Russian Ambassador Leaves US for Consultations in Moscow as Tensions Grow

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov will leave Washington on Saturday to attend consultations in Moscow in a telling sign of a new low in the relations between the two countries.

The rather extreme diplomatic gesture comes after US President Joe Biden replied in the affirmative to a question whether he believes his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin was a "killer" and vowed the Russian president will "pay a price."

The Russian Embassy in Washington said Antonov will participate in interagency discussions in Moscow on ways to mend ties with the United States. Many diplomats have lamented the "ill-considered" statements by US officials of which Biden's is the latest in a row that jeopardize the important relationship with Russia.

The Biden administration has refrained from a tit-for-tat response. US Ambassador John Sullivan remains in Moscow and continues his engagements with the Russian people, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

The only previous instance of Russia temporarily recalling its ambassador from the United States was in 1998 - in protest against Anglo-American air attacks on Iraq. Antonov's predecessor, Yuli Vorontsov, returned to Washington five days later. The United States has recalled its ambassadors from Moscow in 1934 and 1980.

In his reaction to Biden's remarks, Putin said "it takes one to know one" and wished the US President "good health" while at the same time inviting him to publicly discuss bilateral issues as early as on Friday or Monday.

Biden said he is certain he and Putin will "talk at some point," but did not commit to any timeframe. The two presidents held conversation over the telephone in the early days of the new Biden administration and agreed to extend the New START treaty - the only remaining nuclear arms control regime between the two countries.

The Biden administration imposed sanctions on Russia over alleged poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny and accused it of interfering with the 2020 US presidential election by attempting to undermine Biden.

The White House warned that more "seen and unseen" reprisals are coming within weeks for other alleged misdeeds if their attribution to Russia is verified by the intelligence review.

Russia denies all allegations, which range from accusations it undertook a massive cyber attack against the US computer company SolarWinds to putting bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan.

The Biden administration has said it seeks stable and predictable relations with Russia and is open for cooperation in areas of mutual interests, but will not shy away from a showdown where necessary.

Biden vowed a more straightforward and firm approach compared to his predecessor Donald Trump, who was routinely criticized by Democrats, neo-Conservatives and others for allegedly having a soft stance toward Putin despite implementing multiple rounds of sanctions and other hostile actions against Russia.

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China's Top Diplomat Says 'Many Major Differences' Remain After Talks With US in Alaska

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) - China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi told reporters that the high-level meeting with top US diplomats in Alaska was constructive, but there are still many major differences between the two countries.

"The strategic dialogue is direct, frank, and constructive... but there are so many major differences sitting between the two sides," Yang said on Friday after wrapping up talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

Yang said China and the United States should follow the principles of no confrontation and conflicts to guide bilateral relations.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 20 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

\* US President Joe Biden will meet with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin at an appropriate time, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

\* Russia's Black Sea Fleet is monitoring the actions of the US Navy cruiser Monterey, which entered the Black Sea, the Russian Defense Ministry's National Defense Control Center said.

\* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken expects next week to have a discussion on relations with Russia at the NATO ministerial in Brussels and on its margins, Acting Assistant Secretary of State Philip Reeker said.

DRONE STRIKE IN SAUDI ARABIA

- \* The Houthi rebel movement on Friday conducted six drone attacks on facilities belonging to the Saudi Aramco oil company in Riyadh, Houthi military spokesman Yahia Saria said.
- \* The attack on the Saudi Aramco oil refinery in Riyadh did not result in any casualties, but did result in a fire which has been brought under control, the SPA news agency reported.
- \* The United States condemns the recent Houthi attacks on Saudi oil refineries that are disrupting global energy supplies, US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said.

#### AFGHANISTAN PEACE TALKS

- \* Kabul hopes that Russia and the United States will continue cooperating on the Afghan peace process despite the existing bilateral tensions, Abdullah Abdullah, the head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, told Sputnik on Friday.
- \* The Taliban movement urges the United States to complete the pullout of its troops from Afghanistan by May 1 as agreed last year, Suhail Shaheen, a member of the movement's negotiation team during the talks in Moscow, said.
- \* The Taliban movement is holding consultations on its potential participation in the UN-led conference on Afghanistan that Turkey will host in April, Shaheen said.
- \* The Central Asian countries should support the Afghan-led peace process, the governments of the United States, Afghanistan and Tajikistan said in a joint statement after holding a trilateral virtual meeting.

#### SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS

- \* Militants of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham terrorist organization (banned in Russia) are preparing provocations with the use of poisonous substances in the Syrian province of Idlib, Rear Adm. Alexander Karpov, deputy head of the Russian Center for Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, said on Friday.
- \* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused the Syrian armed forces of firing missiles on the Kilis Province in south of Turkey.

#### US-CHINA TALKS

- \* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan had serious discussions with their Chinese counterparts in a second meeting in the state of Alaska in the morning, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Friday.
- \* The United States will move along the path of diplomacy even as it continues having tough conversations with China, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierren said on Friday.

#### CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

- \* German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that it was necessary to use Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V in the European Union, once approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), and if the EU does not order it, Germany will do it on its own.
- \* Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi does not rule out that in the absence of coordination within the EU, the country will be able to order the Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V.

\* The US government plans to loan about 4 million doses of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine to Mexico and Canada, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said.