

03/25/21 Thursday

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Octopuses May Have Short Dreams While Sleeping, Study Finds
by [Mary F.](#)

Octopuses are highly intelligent animals that can store both short and long-term memories according to maze and problem-solving experiments. In lab settings, octopuses have also been trained to differentiate between various shapes and patterns.

In a new [study](#) published earlier this month in the journal *iScience*, scientists found that octopuses have alternating periods of “quiet” and “active” sleep, similar to rapid eye movement (REM) seen in mammals. During rapid eye movement, the brain’s neuron activity is similar to that of waking hours. Most vividly recalled dreams take place during REM sleep.

The alternating cycle of quiet and active sleep repeated every 30 to 40 minutes. During periods of quiet sleep, the animals were pale and still, but during active sleep periods, the octopuses’ skin became a darker color and their suckers also contracted.

“For around 40 seconds, they dramatically change their color and their skin texture. Their eyes are also moving,” Sylvia Medeiros, a graduate student at the Brain Institute of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, told NPR. “All of this happens very conspicuously.”

The analysis, conducted by Sidarta Ribeiro at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte in Natal, Brazil, and his colleagues, was the result of recording and observing four octopuses in the laboratory for several day and night periods.

To ensure that the animals were actually asleep, researchers checked to see whether they would respond to various stimuli such as videos of swimming crabs, food items or vibrations to their tanks.

Due to the fact that the animals were found to have similar sleep patterns to birds and reptiles, which follow a REM sleep pattern, researchers speculated that octopuses might have dreams as well.

“If the octopus is having something like a dream, it’s probably a very short behavioral sequence, it’s not a narrative,” Ribeiro told [New Scientist](#). “Whether they are having some sort of inner life with a narrative about themselves ... we don’t know.”

“It would be very interesting to see what’s happening in their brains while they go from awake to quiet and then active sleep,” he added.

However, given the fact that octopuses have short active phases, the dreams are not expected to be very complex.

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COVID-19 'Long Haulers' Most Often Experience Brain Fog, Fatigue, Study Finds
by [Mary F.](#)

COVID-19 long haulers refer to people who have not fully recovered from COVID-19 weeks or even months after first having symptoms. While some long-haulers have symptoms for weeks, others feel better for an extended period of time, and then relapse with symptoms.

A new [study](#) published earlier this week in the Annals of Clinical and Translational Neurology found that non-hospitalized COVID-19 "long haulers" who face symptoms over a month later report several neurologic symptoms. The patients in the study had mild respiratory symptoms like sore throat, cough and mild fever, but never developed low oxygen levels of pneumonia.

The average age of participants was 43 and the majority of them were female.

According to the researchers at Northwestern Medicine, 85 of 100 non-hospitalized long haulers experienced brain fog, headache, numbness, disorder of taste and smell and muscle pain. In addition to neurological symptoms, the patients are reported experiencing fatigue, shortness of breath and chest pain.

"Our study is the first to report neurologic findings in non-hospitalized COVID-19 long-haulers, including detailed neurologic exam, diagnostic testing, and validated measures of patient quality of life, as well as cognitive function test results," Dr. Igor Koralnik, chief of neuro-infectious diseases and global neurology in the Ken & Ruth Davee Department of Neurology at Northwestern Medicine, said in a [release](#).

Many of the patients also reported experiencing fluctuating symptoms for months. When asked to estimate their percentage of recovery in comparison to their pre-COVID-19 state, patients, on average, said they felt 64% recovered after five months.

"We were surprised by the number of patients who were suffering from depression/anxiety before their COVID-19 diagnosis, and this suggests a possible neuropsychiatric vulnerability to developing long COVID," says Dr. Koralnik.

"We are already performing cognitive rehab in some patients and are considering a variety of therapeutic interventions," Koralnik explained. "We are also evaluating long-lasting neurologic symptoms across larger groups of COVID-19 patients including those with a history of hospitalization for severe illness. Future extended studies are needed to evaluate the cognitive impacts on long-haulers and devise appropriate treatment options."

Another [study](#) published in the Annals of Clinical and Translational Neurology in October 2020 analyzed 509 hospitalized COVID-19 patients and found that 82% of those patients experienced neurologic manifestations, as well.

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Biden Reportedly Scrambles to Open Emergency Facilities to House Surge of Migrant Children
by [Mary F.](#)

More than 5,000 unaccompanied minors are being held in facilities managed by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) along the US-Mexico border, as the US President Joe Biden administration struggles to contain the surge of migrants streaming into the US.

The Joe Biden administration is set to open up at least six emergency facilities to house the surge of migrant children at the US-Mexico border, according to a [report by CBS News](#). The facilities that have been opened or will be opened include two convention centers in Dallas and San Diego, as well as an arena in San Antonio.

During a news conference Thursday, Biden also said that El Paso's Fort Bliss Army post will be used to shelter as many as 5,000 migrant children. In addition, the Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio will also be used to house 350 children.

Over the past few weeks, the Biden administration has also opened up thousands of new beds at "influx" shelters in Texas and California, as the number of migrant children in US custody surpasses 16,000.

According to a report by CBS, more than 11,500 of those children are being housed in shelters and emergency housing sites while another 5,000 were left in overcrowded Border Patrol facilities.

Over the last week, senior Customs and Border Protection officials have accused the Biden administration of ignoring warning signs and briefings that the migrant crisis would occur at the US southern border.

"The administration knew it was going to happen and everything since [Biden took office] has been how to manage it. The response is to merely manage the processing - not to stem the tide," a senior Customs and Border Protection official [told Fox News](#) earlier this week.

During a daily presser on Wednesday, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador blamed President Biden for the border crisis, stating that Biden set expectations that migrants would be more easily permitted into the US, [the New York Post reported](#).

"Expectations were created that with the government of President Biden there would be a better treatment of migrants. And this has caused Central American migrants, and also from our country, wanting to cross the border thinking that it is easier to do so," he said at his daily morning presser.

Earlier this week, Biden also sent envoys to Mexico and Guatemala to help curb migrant traffic, [Reuters reported](#) at the time.

Since becoming president, Biden has done with several Trump-era immigration policies. In addition to ending construction of the Mexico border wall, Biden has also reversed the "Remain in Mexico" policy, which requires that migrants from Central American countries wait for asylum hearings outside the US. Biden also formally suspended the so-called "Asylum Cooperative Agreements" (ACAs) with Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Under those agreements, the Trump administration could prevent people arriving at the border the option to seek asylum in the US.

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Ever Given Owner Apologizes as Officials Say It May Take Weeks to Refloat Vessel Stuck in Suez Canal

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

A global focus was zeroed in on Egypt's Suez Canal this week, after a massive 200,000-plus ton vessel known as the Ever Given became wedged in the waterway, which sees about 13% of global trade pass through the channel. Repeated attempts to free the vessel have been unsuccessful.

Shoei Kisen Kaisha, the Japanese owner of the giant cargo ship, issued a statement on Thursday apologizing for the unintended setback as officials tasked with clearing the passage suggest it may take weeks.

The company noted that the Ever Given [got stuck](#) across the narrow canal on Tuesday as a result of "stormy weather" that forced the vessel to run aground, and acknowledged that it was working with maritime solutions provider Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement to remedy the situation.

"The situation is extremely difficult," officials stated in a [Thursday release](#). "We sincerely apologize for causing a great deal of concern to the vessels scheduled to sail and all related parties while navigating the Suez Canal."

Officials also indicated that none of the crew members aboard the Ever Green sustained any injuries, and that at present there are no indications of any oil spills as a result of the incident. Despite repeated attempts by a flotilla of tugboats, dredgers and diggers, the Ever Given has remained embedded in the Suez Canal, even after fruitless efforts were renewed at high tide earlier today.

Aiding in the removal efforts is also Dutch company Smit Salvage, whose parent company is construction firm Boskalis. Offering some insight into the latest refloating measures, Boskalis' CEO Peter Berdowski revealed that freeing the Ever Given from the Suez Canal could take several days to weeks.

In comments to Dutch outlet [Nieuwsuur](#), Berdowski remarked that the Panamanian-flagged container vessel is like "a very heavy whale on the beach, so to speak," and that with 20,000 fully loaded containers aboard, there is "enormous weight on the sandbar."

As recent efforts have not proven successful, Berdowski did speculate that an option to free the 1,300-foot-long vessel could be to simply remove some containers, as it has become increasingly clear that "it is not really possible to pull loose."

"But the more secure the ship is, the longer an operation will take," he pointed out. "It can take days to weeks. Also consider bringing in all the equipment we need, that's not around the corner."

However, this is not the first time that a cargo ship has blocked the canal. Previously, in 2017, a Japanese vessel encountered mechanical issues and temporarily created some traffic as tug boats were deployed for the assist.

At present, latest figures from officials state that some [156 vessels](#) are waiting in the Suez Canal for passage.

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Kentucky Man Arrested Outside Hospital After Showing Up With Body Armor, Firearms
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Much of the US has remained on high alert after two back-to-back mass shootings unfolded in Georgia and in Colorado over the last few days, claiming the lives of 18 individuals, including a police officer. The shooting in Colorado marked the seventh US mass shooting in 2021. Law enforcement authorities in Lexington, Kentucky, arrested a local resident outside of an area hospital on Thursday after officials were informed that he was potentially armed and dangerous. Officials with the University of Kentucky Police were initially tipped off to the suspect by local police in the nearby city of Versailles. At the time, Versailles officials relayed that they had been informed that a man believed to be armed and dangerous would be visiting a family member at the university's Albert B. Chandler Hospital.

A [Thursday release](#) issued by the university police force indicates that the suspect was later identified as 44-year-old Versailles resident Bryan Carroll, and that they had managed to track him down at the medical facility by tapping the hospital's surveillance system.

Officials were able to apprehend Carroll "without incident as he was leaving the hospital," according to the release.

However, upon searching Carroll, authorities found body armor, firearms and what was believed to be two explosive devices. The suspected explosives were found inside Carroll's vehicle. It's presently unclear why Carroll had the supplies in his possession, as officials have not released details on the matter.

Authorities underscored in their statement that "at no time was anyone in danger."

Aside from the university police, the Thursday incident prompted the involvement of the FBI, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Lexington Police and the Lexington Fire Department. Local station WKYT [reported](#) that as a result of the incident, Carroll is facing 14 charges, including four counts of use of weapon of mass destruction and possession of a handgun by a convicted felon, among other offenses. The outlet also noted that Carroll was previously arrested for assault, kidnapping, drugs and traffic violations.

Carroll is currently being held at the Fayette County Detention Center. Investigations into the offense are ongoing.

The Lexington arrest came as congressional lawmakers have been called on to implement stricter gun control measures in the wake of the two recent shootings. Reports previously surfaced that the Biden White House was weighing the use of [executive orders](#) to impose some form of controls.

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Prince Charles Reportedly Wanted to File 'Point by Point' Response to Harry, Meghan's Tell-All

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, both Prince Harry and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, made global headline news after dishing out details on the inner workings of the so-called “firm” and the royal family. The interview shed light on their 2018 wedding and the events that followed before they decided to step away from official duties.

Frustrated over the revelations made in the recent Oprah tell-all interview, Prince Charles initially sought to release a “point by point” response to various statements made by his son and daughter-in-law, newly surfaced reports have detailed.

Katie Nicholl, the royal expert for pop culture outlet Entertainment Tonight, [revealed](#) on Wednesday that Prince Charles was so upset with the remarks made by Harry and Meghan that he wanted to write up a detailed response to each claim made during the much-anticipated interview.

"My understanding is that Prince Charles did want to issue a more detailed statement [in response] to the Oprah interview, and possibly address some of those issues point by point," Nicholl said.

"But there was an evening to think about things and in the end, it was decided that a shorter statement would be better, [and] that going at things point by point could be potentially more damaging and give more ammunition for the row to continue."

According to Nicholl, both Prince Charles and Prince William were among the royals interested in setting the record straight and “correct[ing] some of the things that the couple had said."

The bombshell interview revealed a variety of behind-the-scenes issues, from the Duchess of Cambridge making Meghan cry to the more shocking details that questions were raised about the complexion of their firstborn child’s skin tone. Also highlighted was the lack of protection that Meghan allegedly failed to receive from the royal family, as tabloids carried out a campaign against her that was filled with colonial undertones.

However, within those revelations were also tidbits about the gray relationship between Harry and his father, who reportedly stopped speaking to him after the pair stepped away from working royal life. Harry also alleged that Charles financially cut him and his family off after they stepped down as senior royals.

Nicholl noted that “Prince Charles was particularly frustrated by the suggestion that financially he just cut the couple off,” explaining that “if you speak to sources in Charles' camp, that wasn't the case.”

“He did continue funding them for quite some time after they moved first to Canada, and then to America,” the royal expert stated, before adding that “there was at one point the feeling that they did want to address more than just the issue of race.”

Additionally, Nicholl emphasized that there does not appear to be a breakdown within the senior royals, and that the group have recently been “really working as a unit together” in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the departure of Harry and Meghan from royal duties.

“I think there isn't discord there. I think they're coming at this from the same place and working together as a team,” she noted.

In the wake of the explosive tell-all, the royal family issued a [rare statement](#) and indicated that it would be privately addressing racial issues that were raised and revealed to the public. The

statement from Buckingham Palace was followed up by [remarks](#) from Prince William who stated his family is "very much not racist."

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COVID, Border Crisis & Guns Laws: Key Takeaways From Joe Biden's First Presidential Press Conference

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Weeks after being sworn in, US President Joe Biden has held his very first news conference. The commander-in-chief took the opportunity to address a variety of concerns among the US public, including the pandemic and the surging migrant crisis at the US-Mexico border, among others.

Appearing in his first news conference on Thursday, Biden informed reporters that his administration is continuing to work towards delivering on promises that were made early on after assuming the presidency.

Biden kicked off the highly anticipated conference by stating that the administration would be establishing a new goal to administer 200 million COVID-19 vaccines within his first 100 days in office.

"I know it's ambitious ... but no other country has come close," Biden told reporters. "I believe we can do it."

However, Biden also acknowledged that the administration has more to do when it comes to children returning to schools, and improving the economic situation so that jobless Americans can return to the workforce.

"I got elected to solve problems," the president remarked, underscoring that his term's "fundamental problem is getting people some peace of mind."

"Help is here and hope is on the way," he added.

Migrants Coming to US Because 'Biden's a Good Guy'

Over the last several weeks, the Biden administration has repeatedly tiptoed around using the "crisis" label when it comes to describing the current migrant surge at the US-Mexico border, despite several Border Patrol facilities becoming severely overcrowded.

Asked about the skyrocketing migrant cases, Biden told the assembled group of reporters that "I guess I should be flattered that people are coming. Because I'm the nice guy, that's the reason why it's happening."

"They know that I'm a decent man or however it's phrased. That's why they're coming because Biden's a good guy. Truth of the matter is, nothing has changed," he added.

Under the Biden administration, the number of illegal border crossings and asylum claims have significantly increased. Although Border Patrol officials are turning away many adults and families, they have been giving clearance to hundreds of unaccompanied minors.

Figures recently obtained by [CNN](#) reveal that officials detained more than 11,000 unaccompanied minors between February 28 and March 20 alone, marking a sharp increase from the 5,600 children who were taken into custody in January.

Asked about the camp conditions that migrants are being subjected to, Biden stated that the "totally unacceptable" circumstances are "gonna get a whole hell of a lot better real quick, or we're gonna hear of some people leaving."

"We can get this done," he stressed, stating that over the next week about 1,000 people being held at Border Patrol centers will be moved to "safe, secure beds and facilities."

Touching on why he has yet to push Republicans on immigration reform, Biden remarked that members of the GOP "have to posture for a while. They gotta get it out of their system."

However, Biden did inform reporters that he is willing to work with Republicans who "want to solve the problem or make the situation better."

Biden's remarks came one day after he [selected](#) Vice President Kamala Harris to serve as the point person in leading the White House's efforts to tackle the growing crisis. The initiative will see Harris work to stem the flow of illegal border crossings, while also working to establish a partnership with El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

Earlier, the US House of Representatives cleared [two immigration bills](#) to create a pathway to citizenship for over 2 million immigrants who arrived as minors in the US. While the effort has been praised, both bills face an uphill battle in the evenly divided US Senate.

Unlikely US Troops Will Leave Afghanistan by May 1 Deadline

Asked about the possibility of American troops withdrawing from Afghanistan by May 1, Biden told reporters that it was unlikely that the administration would be able to meet the deadline, which is in accordance with the US-Taliban agreement.

"It's going to be hard to see the May 1 deadline," he stated, explaining the withdrawal setback is for "tactical reasons."

Soldiers with Task Force Iron at Bost Airfield, Afghanistan. Sixteen years into its longest war, the United States is sending another 4,000 troops to Afghanistan in an attempt to turn around a conflict characterized by some of the worst violence since the Taliban were ousted in 2001. Biden further noted that he has been meeting with allies to map out a way in which US forces will be able to "leave in a safe and orderly way." He also stated that he "can't picture" troops remaining in the Middle Eastern country by 2022.

"It is not my intention to stay there for a long time... we are not staying a long time," he doubled down, adding that "we will leave, the question is when we'll leave."

The president's latest remarks on the topic came after recent reports suggested that Biden was considering asking for a six-month extension on the deal.

Recent North Korea Missile Tests Violated UN Resolution

Addressing the recent missile tests carried out by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Biden highlighted that the move was a violation of UN Resolution 1718, and that the US would respond accordingly."

"There will be responses if they choose to escalate," he said in response to the ballistic missile tests, which marked the very first under the Biden White House.

Additionally, the commander-in-chief indicated that his administration would be willing to open a diplomatic resolution if it's "conditioned upon the end result of denuclearization."

Biden stressed that North Korea is a top foreign policy crisis.

The DPRK's missile tests came after Pyongyang issued several warnings against the US for more than a week over its newly restarted military drills in the region. The US had previously held off on conducting exercises with regional partners as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but opted to renew its efforts earlier this month alongside South Korea.

North Korea has long believed US exercises are a dress rehearsal for an invasion. Most recently, Kim Yo Jong, the sister of North Korea leader Kim Jong Un, [urged](#) the US against "causing a stink" in the region with its drills, warning that it would take "special" measures if the events were not called off.

While the Biden administration has not offered a clear take on its policy toward Pyongyang, it's believed that the US president will follow policies taken by his predecessor. The US and North Korea have remained at a stalemate since talks came to an abrupt end in February 2019.

US 'Not Looking for Confrontation' With China

Touching on the ever-tense US-China relations, Biden emphasized that while his administration has no interest in engaging in a clash with China, it also is not going to let it become the leading country in the world.

"We'll have strong competition, but we'll insist China play by the international rules," Biden said, before adding that the US is "not looking for confrontation although we know there will be steep, steep competition."

"They have an overall goal to become the leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the world and the most powerful country in the world. That's not going to happen on my watch," he added.

The president explained that in order to push back against China, the US needs to reinvest in American workers and the sciences, reestablish its alliances with world partners and call out human rights violations in China.

He added that he intends to host global leaders at the White House "before too long" to discuss the future.

Gun Control Measures Are 'Matter of Timing'

In the wake of two back-to-back mass shootings in the US, Biden promised that a range of rapid actions would be taken on gun control in the near future, but stressed that it would take time. Biden's [campaign promises](#) on the topic of gun control stated that he would work to hold gun manufacturers accountable, institute a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines and introduce legislation that would halt the proliferation of so-called "ghost guns," among other efforts.

To date, Biden has not yet delivered on those promises.

Biden told a reporter that he was still committed to delivering on his campaign promises, but underscored that "it is a matter of timing."

Following the recent deadly shootings in Georgia and Colorado, Biden has urged congressional lawmakers to take up a new assault weapons ban similar to the federal assault weapons ban that expired in 2004 under the Bush administration. He's also called for the implementation of tougher background checks.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [recently remarked](#) that administration officials were also considering the possibility of tapping executive order in order to roll out comprehensive control measures.

"There's lots of leverage you can take, obviously, as president and vice president," Psaki said at the time.

The deadly attack in Boulder, Colorado, marked the seventh mass shooting the US has documented in 2021. The incident claimed the lives of 10 people, and came less than a week after a gunman attacked three massage parlors in Georgia. The Georgia shootings killed eight individuals, six of whom were women of Asian descent.

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Lights, Camera, Biden - Political Cartoon

US President Joe Biden held his very first news conference on Thursday, bringing to a close the longest amount of time in which an American president has held off hosting such an event in modern times.

Addressing various domestic and foreign matters, Biden kicked off the highly anticipated conference by announcing that his administration would be setting a goal of administering 200 million vaccines within his first 100 days in office.

"I know it's ambitious ... but no other country has come close," Biden told reporters. "I believe we can do it."

At present, a total of 133 million vaccines have been given to the American public, according to [tracking](#) by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Less than 50 million Americans have been fully vaccinated against the deadly SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Biden also took the opportunity to address other [concerning topics](#), such as the surging migrant crisis at the US' southern border, ongoing tensions with North Korea and China and efforts to implement comprehensive gun control measures.

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Colorado Judge Throws Out Kidnapping Charges for 'Justice for Elijah McClain' Protest Leaders by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Three activists in Aurora, Colorado, are facing decades in prison for charges in connection with a July 2020 protest that surrounded an area police precinct. The trio's lawyers have argued they were singled out by police for helping organize militant protests demanding justice for Elijah McClain, a 23-year-old Black man who died in police custody.

Adams County Judge Leroy Kirby decided at a pretrial hearing on Thursday that first-degree kidnapping charges against activists Lillian House, Joel Northam and Eliza Lucero were "a bridge too far," finding that the July 3, 2020, demonstration outside the Aurora Police District 1 Substation was a "peaceful protest."

The ruling came after a two-day hearing at the Adams County Justice Center intended to establish probable cause for the charges, which together could land the activists in prison for nearly 50 years.

"The burden of proof for this preliminary hearing was low," Judge Kirby told the court, adding, "it was not met."

However, the activists still face a slew of other charges, including inciting a riot, participating in a riot, and attempting to influence a public servant.

During a livestreamed briefing on Thursday evening, House said the charges were "filed against us not because we had committed any crime, but because we dared to stand up to the Aurora Police Department - and because we were effective."

She called the loss of the kidnapping charges a "major blow to this political prosecution," but noted they still face several charges that could land them in prison for as long as 36 years. "We are not afraid and we will not stray from this."

"The case against us is ill-contrived, it is obvious persecution," Northam added, noting the remaining charges are "just as retaliatory, just as unjustified" as the one thrown out.

"The prosecutors office in Adams County took a major 'L' today," Northam said. "We have won a victory but we have not won 'the' victory."

The charges stem from a July 3, 2020, protest demanding the firing of three officers involved in the death of Elijah McClain, killed during a police stop 10 months prior. The activists led hundreds of demonstrators on a march that ended at the police precinct, surrounding the station for much of the evening.

During the hearing, prosecutors argued that the protesters had kidnapped the 18 police officers who were inside the station, but the judge found that the officers' own orders not to confront the protesters were the primary reason they stayed inside the station - not fear of the group outside, which he said there was not evidence to conclude had been "agitated."

The defense has argued that House, Lucero, and Northam were targeted by the police for punishment because they are leaders of the local branch of the Party for Socialism and Liberation, a Marxist party that has helped organize the protests and greatly raised awareness of the community's demands for justice over McClain's death.

'Light in a Whole Lot of Darkness'

McClain died on August 30, 2019, while in the custody of Aurora Police. As he was walking home from a convenience store that evening, a resident called the police, saying he looked "sketchy," but noted he appeared unarmed and that no one was in danger. When McClain was confronted by three police officers - Nathan Woodyard, Jason Rosenblatt and Randy Roedema - he did not immediately respond due to having headphones on, leading to a confrontation in which police tackled McClain to the ground and put him in a chokehold that caused him to lose consciousness.

After the officers claimed to colleagues who arrived on the scene that McClain was "definitely on something" and had attacked them with "incredible, crazy strength," paramedics injected him with ketamine as a sedative. On the way to the hospital, he suffered cardiac arrest and died three days later. According to the coroner's report, McClain received a much higher dose than he should have received given his weight. Numerous medical associations have objected to the nebulous concept of "excited delirium" the officers claimed he was suffering from, as well as the administration of ketamine to him at all.

Later, in June 2020, [several photos emerged](#) on social media of several Aurora PD officers at the location of McClain's arrest mocking the incident. The officers were placed on administrative leave.

People who knew McClain have denied he had a remotely aggressive demeanor, with one friend telling [the Colorado Sentinel](#) "he was the sweetest, purest person I have ever met. He was definitely a light in a whole lot of darkness." A massage therapist, McClain also taught himself to play the violin, which he played for animals at a local animal shelter to soothe their anxiety.

City Report Highlights Contradictions in Police Story

A police [investigation afterward exonerated](#) Woodyard, Rosenblatt and Roedema of any criminal wrongdoing and a subsequent review of their actions in February 2020 found their application of force consistent with police training. The autopsy by the Adams County coroner found the cause of death "undetermined," meaning it could also have been the result of natural causes, including his chronic asthma.

McClain was "violently struggling with officers, who were attempting to restrain him," the [November 2019 autopsy](#) report by Dr. Stephen J. Cina read, which was based on the police reports of the incident. "Most likely the decedent's physical exertion contributed to death. It is unclear if the officers' actions contributed as well."

However, [an independent investigation](#) commissioned by the Aurora City Council was published last month that eviscerated the officers' actions, finding that "Aurora police and paramedics made substantial errors at nearly every stage of their interaction with Elijah McClain and the detectives tasked with investigating the incident that led to the 23-year-old's death stretched the truth to exonerate the officers involved."

The report further noted that "the body-worn camera audio, limited video, and Major Crimes' interviews with the officers tell two contrasting stories. The officers' statements on the scene and in subsequent recorded interviews suggest a violent and relentless struggle. The limited video, and the audio from the body-worn cameras, reveal Mr. McClain surrounded by officers, all larger than he, crying out in pain, apologizing, explaining himself, and pleading with the officers."

Movement Demands Justice

In the aftermath of McClain's death, a movement emerged led by community activists demanding the officers involved in his death be fired and charged with murder, leading to [Aurora's largest-ever protests](#) and an online petition that garnered millions of signatures. One of these protests was the July 3 rally, march, and encampment outside the police station for several hours, until police ordered them to disperse in the early morning of July 4. It was from this protest that the charges against the activists were brought.

Then on September 17, police coordinated a series of surprise raids in which Northam, House, Lucero, as well as two other protesters, Terrance Roberts and Russell Ruch, were arrested. In Northam's case, a SWAT team brought an armored vehicle to his apartment and pounded his door down, while others were confronted by police during daily activities around town. After, they were held in jail for eight days in 23-hour-a-day COVID-19 lockdown conditions, despite a legal requirement for bond to be set within 48 hours of arrest.

However, the movement demanding justice has continued, and the arrest and charges against the activists have been [condemned internationally](#). A committee for supporting the activist's

defense has been organized and [a short documentary](#) on their case and the broader movement for justice for McClain has been produced by the leftist news outlet BreakThrough News.
Edit: Quotes added to first section from post-hearing briefing by House and Northam

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'Double Standards and Hypocrisy': China Publishes Report on 2020 Human Rights Abuses in US

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Since declaring China a "malign actor" who poses a major threat to the US in 2018, the US has opened a new ideological offensive by claiming China has a bad human rights record in Xinjiang and Hong Kong - an offensive that has only gained steam since US President Joe Biden took office in January.

In a sharp rebuke to US criticisms of Chinese internal policy, Beijing has published its own report highlighting the state of human rights inside the United States. The document notes extensive racial discrimination, continuous social unrest, record social inequality, and the government's catastrophic response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Titled "The Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2020," the document [published on Wednesday](#) by the State Council Information Office begins with the infamous last words of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man who died in May 2020 while handcuffed and held against the ground by Minneapolis Police officer Derek Chauvin, who pressed his knee against Floyd's neck as Floyd repeated "I can't breathe!"

Floyd's death touched off the largest uprising seen in the United States in half a century as millions poured into the streets to speak out against endemic anti-black violence by police and vigilantes - and were met with batons, tear gas and rubber bullets. More than 10,000 people were arrested by US police in just two weeks, and some activists [face trumped-up charges](#) that could land them in prison for decades.

"The US government, instead of introspecting on its own terrible human rights record, kept making irresponsible remarks on the human rights situation in other countries, exposing its double standards and hypocrisy on human rights," the report states. "Standing at a new crossroads, mankind is faced with new, grave challenges. It is hoped that the US side will show humility and compassion for the suffering of its own people, drop hypocrisy, bullying, 'Big Stick' [diplomacy] and double standards, and work with the international community to build a community with a shared future for humanity."

'Incompetent' COVID-19 Response Causes 'Slaughter'

The report highlights the central role of the US government in allowing the COVID-19 pandemic to grow as widely and as quickly as it did, as well as for allowing it to persist for as long as it has.

The combined effect has been that with just 5% of the world population, the US has accounted for 25% of all confirmed cases of COVID-19 and almost 20% of deaths from the disease. On

Thursday, data collected by The New York Times found that at least 545,300 Americans had died from COVID-19 and 30.5 million infected.

The US government's slow response and the dismissive attitude of its central leadership enabled the virus to take hold and ensured that it hit communities far harder than was necessary. "Had the American authorities taken science-based measures to contain the pandemic, this could have been avoided," the report notes. "But since they had not, the pandemic, as epidemiologist and former head of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) William Foege had put it, is 'a slaughter' to the United States."

The chaotic response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States in 2020 has led to dire consequences, according to the Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2020, which was released by China's State Council Information Office on Wednesday.

Decline of US Democracy

In addition to the domination of American politics by moneyed interests, the report also notes the corresponding decline in public trust among the US population and the ultimate culmination of divisiveness, distrust and despondency in the [January 6, 2021, insurrection](#) at the US Capitol in Washington, DC.

During the incident, supporters of the sitting president, Donald Trump, rallied to defend his rejection of the November 2020 election results, and militant elements led a storming of the national legislature that temporarily dispersed Congress in the middle of certifying the election results. The move failed and the results were later certified, but not before the Capitol was ransacked and five people - four rioters and one Capitol Police officer - were killed.

The incident caused shock around the globe as the "beacon of democracy" became "what its leaders used to condemn: being unable to avoid violence and bloody destruction during transfer of power."

"The scenes (the US Capitol building violence) we have seen are the result of lies and more lies, of division and contempt for democracy, of hatred and rabble-rousing - even from the very highest levels," the report quotes German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier as saying the day after the insurrection.

Ethnic Minorities Face Poverty, Police Terror

The report's section on racial discrimination notes, in addition to a series of damning statistics illustrating systemic discrimination and inequality faced by minority communities, that world leaders have spoken up time and time again about the state of human rights in the US.

It notes, for example, that Michele Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights whose commentary about humanitarian crises in Venezuela and other nations often makes US news, has also been highly critical of the state of humanitarian affairs in the United States as well. For example, in May 2020 in response to the killing of Floyd and the mass demonstrations sparked by his death, [Bachelet condemned racist](#) police brutality as well as inequality and racial discrimination in health, education, and employment in the US. In the aftermath of the January 2021 Capitol insurrection, [Bachelet said it was](#) the "destructive impact of sustained, deliberate distortion of facts, and incitement to violence and hatred by political leaders."

Bachelet [spoke out again](#) last week as Chauvin's trial for Floyd's death began, saying, "To end racial injustice in law enforcement, we cannot simply see the tip of the iceberg, we must face the

mass below the surface. We must address the legacies of enslavement, the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, and its context of colonialism.”

Tendayi Achiume, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, [also condemned](#) “the existential threat of police brutality and police violence” in the US and [joined other members](#) of the UN Human Rights Council in a statement supporting the George Floyd protests.

The ethnic minorities in the United States are devastated by racial discrimination, and racism exists in a comprehensive, systematic and continuous manner, according to the Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2020, which was released by China's State Council Information Office on Wednesday

The report also notes the “countless crimes against humanity and genocides” committed by the US government against Native Americans, who have been deprived of the vast majority of their ancestral lands and “still live a life like a second-class citizen.” It notes the endemic poverty on reservations and the high rates of cancer, heart disease, and other illnesses caused by “[toxic radioactive environments](#),” which cause high rates of birth defects as well. The report later notes that Native religions have been trampled on as well, particularly by the [opening of sacred land](#) sites for mining and logging.

In addition, the report notes the stark rise in [anti-Asian racism](#), reporting that one-quarter of Asian-Americans have been bullied for their race in the last year and that “some American politicians have misled the public on purpose,” blaming Chinese people for the deadly pandemic.

In addition, it notes that asylum seekers [were treated “cruelly.”](#) highlighting the enormous migrant detention facilities as well as the [deportation of thousands](#) of children during the pandemic.

Rising Inequality

However, the report notes that inequality has spread across all of American society, with the poorest 165 million Americans holding as much wealth as the richest 50 Americans.

“The epidemic has aggravated wealth inequality,” the report says, noting that the government’s response to the out-of-control pandemic has caused [mass unemployment](#), deprived millions of people of health insurance coverage, and plunged tens of millions of [Americans into hunger](#).

Rogue State

Finally, the report notes the rogue behavior of the US abroad. It notes that the US has walked away from its commitments to the World Health Organization and [Paris Climate Accord](#), has [bullied international organizations](#) such as the International Criminal Court and UN Human Rights Council, and kept unilateral sanctions in place against a number of countries during the pandemic. In addition, then-US President Donald Trump pardoned [four Blackwater mercenaries](#) previously convicted of slaughtering civilians in Iraq during the US’ occupation war there.

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Greta Thunberg Urges Support for ‘Climate Strike’ After Study Links Pollution to Shrinking Penises

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After nearly a century of widespread use of plastics, which do not biodegrade, some scientists estimate that humans consume a credit card's worth of microscopic plastic pieces every week, raising questions about the long-term health effects of exposure.

On Wednesday, [Sky News reported](#) on a new book by Dr. Shanna Swan warning that humanity faces an "existential crisis" in fertility rates due to phthalates, a chemical used in plastics manufacturing that affects the human endocrine system when it's consumed. According to her research, the phthalates imitate estrogen, confusing the hormone production in developing fetuses and resulting in small penises.

Sky's headline was simply "Human penises are shrinking because of pollution, warns scientist." An eye-catching title, to be sure, and one that grabbed the attention of one notoriously cheeky 18-year-old Swedish climate activist. That's right, this is a Greta Thunberg story.

"See you all at the next climate strike," she tweeted in response on Thursday afternoon, adding a little smile emoticon at the end.

As you can guess, Twitter went wild with jokes.

A couple of people drew connections to gun sales in the United States, which, as they say, could be motivated by this phenomenon.

The pint-sized autistic teen drew global attention in 2019 when she angrily [confronted world leaders](#) at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York, suggesting they had sold out the younger generation by failing to adequately respond to the telltale signs of climate change. She has since become a cultural icon, and her cheeky replies to critics have garnered her additional acclaim, although some have raised eyebrows at some of the choices to celebrate her, [such as a statue](#) at England's University of Winchester.

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House Panel Votes to Scrap 2002 Force Authorization Law that Enabled US Invasion of Iraq by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After the US wrongly accused Iraq in 2003 of hiding weapons of mass destruction it planned to use to attack the US and its allies, it launched an invasion and devastating eight-year-long occupation war that killed an estimated 461,000 Iraqis.

The House Foreign Affairs Committee voted on Thursday to advance a bill that would repeal the 2002 law underpinning the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Iraq (AUMF), passed in October of that year, made the forthcoming US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 legal under US law. It built on the AUMF that was passed in 2001, in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda that killed 3,000 people. The 2002 law further extended the principle of pre-emptive strike that was at the heart of then-US President George W. Bush's military doctrine that became the US War on Terror.

“Iraq is a security partner of the United States. Saddam Hussein is long gone. No current operations depend on 2002 AUMF,” committee chair Rep. [Gregory Meeks \(D-NY\)](#) said on Thursday.

However, while a couple of Republicans sided with their Democratic colleagues in voting for the resolution, some said it was too soon to shred the 2002 AUMF, since a replacement for the 2001 AUMF hasn’t been implemented yet.

“Real AUMF reform requires Congress and the administration working together on actual text to replace the aging 2001 and 2002 AUMFs to provide authorities needed to keep the American people, and, most importantly, our deployed troops, safe from terrorists,” said Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), the leading Republican on the committee.

“I think we all agree we’ve abdicated our Article I responsibilities, and we need to look at updating these very old authorized uses of military force,” McCaul said. “But I believe we must do this as part of a comprehensive, updated replacement to provide clear authorities against the terrorists who still plot to kill Americans at home and abroad.”

However, Meeks has insisted the 2001 law is sufficient to meet US defense needs. “There are continuing threats from Iranian-backed militants,” he said. “There are threats from ISIS [Daesh*] and al Qaeda*. That said, the 2002 AUMF doesn’t help us deal with any of these threats. Our forces would stay under Iraq under the 2001 AUMF, and the president can always defend America and our forces under Article II” of the US Constitution.

The [2002 law laid out](#) a litany of accusations of then-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, including that Iraq had failed to comply with the 1991 ceasefire agreement that ended the Gulf War, that Hussein harbored international terrorists and gave aid to al-Qaeda, and that in 1998, Congress had passed a law making it US policy to remove Hussein from power.

After US President Joe Biden ordered airstrikes in eastern Syria that ostensibly targeted Iraqi militias responsible for a rocket attack on an Iraqi base where US troops were stationed, several senators separately [introduced a resolution](#) that would repeal both the 2002 and 1991 AUMFs against Iraq.

However, [as Intelligencer noted](#), Biden didn’t reference an AUMF in his justification for the strikes, as previous presidents Donald Trump and Barack Obama both did when ordering their own airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Instead, Biden claimed the strike was in self-defense - an argument that even fellow Democrats largely haven’t bought.

“Congress should hold this administration to the same standard it did prior administrations, and require clear legal justifications for military action, especially inside theaters like Syria, where Congress has not explicitly authorized any American military action,” Sen. Chris Murphy (D- CT) [said on February 26](#).

The 18th anniversary of the start of the Iraq War was on March 19.

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Emmy-Winning Actor Jessica Walter, Known For 'Archer,' 'Arrested Development,' Dead at 80 by [Evan Craighead](#)

Jessica Walter's career spanned more than six decades, with notable roles in Clint Eastwood's "Play Misty for Me," "Amy Prentiss," "Arrested Development" and the animated FX comedy series "Archer." Walter also served as the second-ever national vice president of the Screen Actors Guild.

The award-winning actor's death was confirmed by daughter Brooke Bowman Thursday afternoon.

"It is with a heavy heart that I confirm the passing of my beloved mom Jessica. A working actor for over six decades, her greatest pleasure was bringing joy to others through her storytelling both on screen and off," she wrote in a statement obtained [by Deadline](#).

"While her legacy will live on through her body of work, she will also be remembered by many for her wit, class and overall joie de vivre."

Walter is said to have died in her sleep on March 24.

The family has requested that, in lieu of flowers, those wishing to send gifts can make a donation to Guiding Eyes for the Blind.

Netizens took to social media after hearing the news to remember the prolific actor and some of her best moments.

Be advised, the footage below contains language and themes some may find offensive.

While her later comedic roles on "Arrested Development" and "Archer" are remembered by most fans, her portrayal of the title character in "Amy Prentiss" - a spinoff of "Ironside" - won her a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Miniseries or a Movie in 1975.

Walter, who is survived by her daughter and grandson, lost her husband of nearly four decades, actor Ron Leibman, in 2019.

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Democratic Senator Calls for Bipartisan Voting Rights Bill as Colleagues Mull Filibuster Reform by [Evan Craighead](#)

With 50 Democrats and 50 Republicans in the US Senate, the 'For the People Act' - passed by a 220-210 party-line vote in the House of Representatives - will need the support of at least 10 GOP lawmakers. Earlier this month, Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT) slammed the proposed legislation, stating it is as if it was "written in hell by the devil himself."

Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) detailed in a Thursday [news release](#) that he believes Democrats need to rally bipartisan support for their [S.1](#) 'For the People Act' in order to halt the trend of "America's declining trust in the government and each other."

The bill, delivered to the Senate on March 11 and introduced by Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-OR) on March 17, calls for the nationwide implementation of same-day, automatic voter registration. It also seeks to conditionally restore the voting rights of felons and to limit gerrymandering.

"There are some legitimate concerns about the implementation of the For the People Act, especially in rural areas," Manchin wrote. He went on to say the "security and reliability" of US election infrastructure needs to be improved to thwart attacks from "foreign adversaries."

At the same time, the US National Intelligence Council [release](#) on the 2020 US general election detailed there were "no indications that any foreign actor attempted to alter any technical aspect of the voting process in the 2020 US elections, including voter registration, casting ballots, vote tabulation, or reporting results."

Manchin, a more moderate Democrat, has held strong in his opposition against the bill and [recently](#) claimed on NBC's "Meet the Press" that "I'm not going to change my mind on the filibuster."

The filibuster is a procedural mechanism that allows one, or more senators to stop a bill from reaching a vote on the Senate floor. Then, at least 60 senators must approve a cloture motion, which halts debate on the bill, to bring the proposed legislation to a vote.

He argued that it is imperative to listen to the "minority to make sure the majority is getting it right."

Other vocal opponents of the current 'For the People Act' draft include [Sen. Lee](#), who, unlike Manchin, argued that "everything about this bill is rotten to the core."

The Republican lawmaker denounced the proposed legislation as an apparent "effort to ensure an institutionally, revolutionary-democratic party of sorts" and claimed the bill makes decisions on voting that have traditionally been left up to states, not the federal government.

Nevertheless, Senate Democrats and US President Joe Biden, a Democrat, continue to push the legislation as-is, and have also floated the idea of reforming the Senate filibuster.

On Thursday, Biden slammed the procedural mechanism as a "relic of the [Jim Crow](#) era," but stopped short of saying it should be completely done away with.

The US president has [previously suggested](#) senators should return to the "old days" of filibusters, which require the individual to "stand up and command the floor" because "you had to keep talking" and voice your concern.

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Photo: New Mom Emily Ratajkowski Polarizes Social Media After Backtracking on Gender Identity Stance
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Months before giving birth, Emily Ratajkowski detailed in a Vogue op-ed that she and husband Sebastian Bear-McClard "ultimately have no idea who—rather than what—is growing inside my belly." The UK-born, American model also said the two would let their child tell them their gender at age 18, rather than make that decision for the child.

Ratajkowski, who gave birth to her child Sylvester on March 8, received mixed responses after the 29-year-old took to Instagram on Wednesday and posted a breastfeeding photo with the caption: "Beautiful boy."

Some of the new mother's followers - like English model Poppy Delevingne - gushed over the parenting post, saying Ratajkowski is giving them baby fever.

"Hi sweetie pie!" commented model Ashley Graham.

However, beneath the slew of verified, celebrity comments, many netizens were wondering why Ratajkowski was reneging on her [gender-related assertions](#).

"Maybe my memory is becoming bad, but I thought you said the baby was going to tell you the preferred gender once old enough," remarked Instagram user [@estplorin](#).

Naturally, the post made it over to Twitter, where more netizens weighed in on the post, which has received well over 2 million likes on Instagram. Once again, responses were mixed.

The 29-year-old has yet to respond to the negative backlash, but she did post a photo on her Instagram story on Thursday, showing off her newborn's new socks.

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Georgia Governor Signs Omnibus Election Reform Bill, Despite Democratic Opposition
by [Evan Craighead](#)

S.B. 202 - a Republican-backed, Georgia voting rights bill - calls for added ID requirements for absentee ballots, expanded in-person weekend voting and shorter runoff election periods in general elections. Those against the legislation have labeled it an effort to suppress voters after historic participation in the 2020 presidential election.

Shortly after the election [reform bill](#) passed on a party-line vote in the Georgia legislature on Thursday, Republican Governor Brian Kemp signed it into law, declaring soon after that it will allow the state to take "another step toward ensuring our elections are secure, accessible and fair.

The Georgia governor also appeared on Fox News Thursday, asserting that the new legislation in Georgia is "completely contrary to what they're trying to do in D.C."

"What this bill actually does is fight the rhetoric from those that are fund-raising off of this issue and polarizing it, to take away from the unconstitutional power grab of H.R. 1 that's going on in Washington D.C. right now," he said. "It further secures our absentee ballots by mail by requiring a photo I.D., which the vast majority of Georgians support. It is also adding days of early voting on the weekends. We're expanding the right to vote in Georgia."

Indeed, the bill, among many things, calls for the submission of Georgia driver's license number or identification card for their absentee ballot to count.

"In order to verify that the absentee ballot was voted by the elector who requested the ballot, the elector shall print the number of his or her Georgia driver's license number or identification card issued," the bill details.

It also calls for an expansion to in-person, weekend voting.

However, many politicians in favor of [H.R.1](#), also known as the 'For the People Act,' have claimed the GA bill seeks to cripple voting rights.

"Politicians in my home state and all across America in their craven lust for power launched a full-fledged assault on voting rights. They are focused on winning at any cost — even the cost of the democracy itself," Sen. Raphael Warnock said earlier this month.

Both 2020 US Senate races in Georgia went to runoff elections after neither candidate secured a majority of the votes in November. However, Senate runoff elections resulted in victories for both Democrats, including Warnock, who unseated now-former Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R-GA). Hours before the bill was signed into law Thursday, Democratic election lawyer Marc Elias tweeted that he plans on taking Kemp to court over the legislation.

Elias notably represented Democrats in several voting rights-related lawsuits related to the 2020 US presidential election

"The role of courts is to protect voters when their elected officials fail them. Today Georgia enacted an extreme anti-voting law in furtherance of the big lie," Elias tweeted. "It will now be up to the judicial branch to right this wrong. Hopefully, in the meantime, Congress will pass H.R.1." However, even some Democrats, such as Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV), have said that the Democrats' current voting rights bill is not the answer to expanding voting. Instead, Manchin, a more moderate Democrat, has called for a bipartisan version of the bill so that Congress may halt the trend of "America's declining trust in the government and each other."

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ANALYSIS - Biden Cites 'Tactical Reasons' as New Excuse for Failed Afghan Exit Plan

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is using tactical issues as a new excuse for delaying the troop exit from Afghanistan after wasting time pursuing a faulty strategy that will now put US forces at risk, analysts told Sputnik.

On Thursday, President Joe Biden, in his first press conference as commander-in-chief, said the US was unlikely to withdraw all of its forces by May 1, the deadline stipulated in the agreement Washington struck with the Taliban in Doha last February, due to "tactical reasons."

NEW EXCUSE TO DELAY FOREVER WAR

The Biden administration has repeatedly accused the Taliban of violating the Doha pact, which calls for the removal of all foreign forces in exchange for anti-terror assurances and engaging in talks with Kabul. US officials have cited the Taliban's ties with al-Qaeda (a terrorist group outlawed in Russia), rising violence, and lack of progress in intra-Afghan negotiations as reasons for delaying the troop exodus.

The Biden administration also was reportedly mulling recommendations in a congressionally-mandated report by the Afghanistan Study Group (ASG), which said the US should stay in Afghanistan until the Taliban met all the conditions of the Doha pact, in addition to leaving behind an Afghan state that was independent, democratic, sovereign, and stable enough to defend itself and protect human rights.

"Shifting excuses usually means they are shopping to find one that is actually believable," Independent Institute Center on Peace and Liberty Director Ivan Eland told Sputnik. "In reality, the US security bureaucracies are still in denial that they lost the war long ago, and that it's best to cut their losses and get out."

US leaders, Eland added, were scared that the Afghan government could not defend itself and would fall apart when the United States left, resulting in a Taliban takeover.

"But staying longer will not improve that situation. This outcome may be likely, but the United States promised to withdraw after the Afghan government and Taliban agreed to begin negotiating a post-war solution," he said. "The United States is moving the goalposts."

Eland said the Biden administration had also exaggerated the security ramifications of a Taliban takeover as one of their primary excuses for delaying.

"If they [Taliban] again harbor al-Qaeda or another anti-US group, the United States can come back and turn the Taliban government into rubble with air power," he said.

Moreover, he added, the United States regularly criticizes other nations, including Russia, for violating agreements.

"Like [then-US President Donald] Trump did with the Iran nuclear deal and Biden is apparently willing to do with the May 1 Afghan withdrawal date - it's OK when the United States fails to follow through with its international commitments," he said.

Besides, Eland suggested, Biden could have played his hand more wisely by leaving and placing the blame on Trump for any implosion in Kabul.

"Biden should actually use the Trump agreement as an excuse to get out," Eland said. "If the Afghan government collapses and the Taliban takes over the country, he can blame it on Trump's agreement and say he had no choice but to honor it."

TIME RAN OUT: US TROOPS NOW TARGETS

After striking the deal with the Taliban, the Trump administration reduced US troop levels in Afghanistan from 14,000 to 2,500 and closed five bases. The US was well ahead of schedule and on track to meeting the terms of the Doha pact before Biden took office. Trump even wanted to bring all troops home by Christmas, which caused a blow up with military leaders that ended with the sacking of top Pentagon officials.

The United States is now reportedly considering keeping the remaining 10,000 NATO troops, including 2,500 Americans, on the ground in Afghanistan until November, although Biden during his presser on Thursday said he cannot "picture" US forces being in Afghanistan next year. Middle East Institute Director of Afghanistan and Pakistan Studies Professor Marvin Weinbaum explained Biden had shifted US strategy and proclaimed his new rationale for temporarily staying even longer in the Central Asian nation because the US presence was being reduced behind schedule.

"[It was announced] only because the time has now grown short and it will be next to impossible to have all US troops together with contractors out of the country by May 1," Weinbaum told Sputnik. "Mostly it has to do with the removal or disposal of equipment."

Biden's latest delay, Weinbaum warned, could unleash new risks on US troops and private sector contractors given the Taliban have threatened to attack any forces on the ground after May 1.

"If the US announces that it will miss the deadline, the targeting of those troops could begin at any time," he said.

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Plain Clothes New York City Police to Patrol Sidewalks for Racial Attacks - Commissioner

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - New York City police officers dressed in street clothes will begin patrolling sidewalks and subway platforms in a crackdown on attacks and harassment of Asian Americans, Police Commissioner Dermot Shea told reporters.

"We'll be using police officers in plain clothes and in teams to prevent new Yorkers from becoming victims in the first place," Shea said at a press conference on Thursday.

Shea warned potential perpetrators that the next person they target on the sidewalk or on a train platform may be a plain clothes NYC police officer, "so think twice."

Asian-Americans reported a surge in harassment after a white man was charged with fatally shooting eight people, including six of Asian descent in a March 16 attack on several massage parlors in the US state of Georgia.

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Biden, Greek Prime Minister Discuss Coordinating on Russia, Western Balkans - White House

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in a recent telephone call discussed defense cooperation and coordinating on matters of mutual interest concerning Russia, China, and the Western Balkans, the White House said in a press release.

"President Joseph R. Biden spoke today with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis...The President conveyed his hope for stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. They also agreed to coordinate on issues of shared interest, including energy security, China, Russia, and the Western Balkans," the release said on Thursday.

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Guatemalan Government Says Preparing to Respond to Possible US-Bound Caravan Next Week

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The Guatemalan government is preparing to respond to a possible US-bound caravan of migrants that may be passing through the country next week, Guatemala's immigration institute said in a press release.

"Given information that has been obtained about the entry of a possible caravan to Guatemalan territory on March 30, the Guatemalan Migration Institute prepares in a timely manner in order to address the mass movement in a timely manner. integral," the release said on Thursday.

The release said the information it has obtained about the potential migrant caravan is not official, however, the government, including its military, and several immigration advocacy

groups are working together to implement a plan to accommodate these individuals and ensure a orderly and safe migration.

The current US apprehension numbers are on pace to beat the previous mass migration flow that happened in fiscal year 2019, which saw a total of 977,509 apprehensions.

A total of 396,958 migrants have been apprehended at the US southern border in fiscal year 2021, which began in October. The data also shows that since October, about 317,590 migrants have been "expelled," turned away immediately at the border under a public health-related policy known as Title 42. The highest number of migrants expelled in fiscal year 2021 occurred in February with 70,183 expulsions.

The CBP data reveals that a majority of undocumented migrants apprehended at the southern border come from Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico.

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Biden's Presser Proved His Fitness for Presidency - Pollster

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Joe Biden's first formal news conference demonstrated that he is physically and intellectually fit to be US President, American public opinion pollster John Zogby told Sputnik.

Within an hour and two minutes of the White House event on Thursday Biden took questions from 10 reporters. He announced plans to run for re-election, vowed to contain China's quest for global dominance, defended his handling of the surge in illegal immigration, doubled his COVID-19 vaccination pledge and admitted that US troops are likely to stay in Afghanistan beyond the May 1 deadline.

"We saw the benefit of experience and, while he may not be as quick as he used to be, he is knowledgeable and energetic enough to be President. I do believe he was asked tough questions about immigration, Afghanistan, and his agenda. And he answered honestly and forthrightly," Zogby, who is senior partner at John Zogby Strategies, said.

He explained that Biden took fewer questions because there were fewer press present - and "also, as part of Biden's tradition, his answers were very long."

"He was not asked about Russia and President [Vladimir] Putin but I think we can all agree that there are so many crisis issues at this moment that it was difficult to fit everything into one session," Zogby said.

Biden briefly mentioned Russia and President Vladimir Putin - both times in the context of the US-China competition.

Zogby gave Biden high grades and said that his only problem "may very well be that he raised expectations for continuing excellent performances that he then be judged by higher standards."

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Columbia Seeks Herd Immunity against COVID-19 by Year End - President

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Columbia is looking to vaccinate 70 percent of its population and have herd immunity against coronavirus by the end of 2021, President Ivan Duque said.

"Our goal is to vaccinate 35 million people by the end of the year so that we can reach 70 percent of the Columbian population and have some sort of a herd immunity in our country," Duque said during a virtual event at the Atlantic Council Thursday.

The objective exceeds current vaccination levels by more than ten times.

Duque said that the country seeks to administer shots against the disease to three million people by April 17. Projections for next week is to reach 4 percent of the population, he added.

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No Evidence Canadian Officials Shared Huawei CFO's Electronic Info With FBI - Lawyer

TORONTO, March 25 (Sputnik) - There is no evidence Canadian law enforcement officials turned over information about Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou's electronic devices to the FBI, a lawyer representing the Canadian government said.

Meng's defense team has alleged that the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) intentionally violated Meng's rights guaranteed by Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms at the behest of the FBI, in order to turn over the sensitive information about the executive to US authorities.

Meng's lawyers accuse former RCMP staff sergeant Ben Chang of covertly sharing information about Meng's electronic devices with the FBI. The former federal agent, who now resides in Macau, a special administrative region of China, refused to testify throughout the proceedings has retained legal representation.

"Based on the evidence, your ladyship will need to decide whether it is more likely than not that Staff Sgt. Chang shared the information with the FBI, and I submit there's no evidentiary basis for reaching such a conclusion," prosecutor John Gibb-Carsley told the court on Thursday.

The government lawyer told British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Heather Holmes that she will have to make a choice between the evidence which, according to him, supports the statements made by Canadian law enforcement officials and a narrative being painted by the defense based "double hearsay."

Gibb-Carsley emphasized that the onus is on Meng's defense team to prove that the information was shared with US law enforcement.

A second government lawyer argued that Canadian border agents were well within their mandate to collect passcodes from Meng.

"Law authorized the [border security officers] BSOs to request passcodes and to examine the devices for admissibility purposes without any legal threshold to be met," government attorney Diba Majzub said during the hearing, citing similar court cases.

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. The defense claims that Kirkland was "untruthful" his testimony and that his actions were part of a conspiracy concocted by the FBI and Canada's federal police force.

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. She 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.

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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Biden Told EU Leaders of His Concerns About Turkey's Ties With Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden discussed during a virtual summit with his European Union member states' counterparts the United States' concerns about Turkey's close ties with Russia, Bloomberg reported citing several EU officials familiar with the matter.

The report said on Thursday that Biden is concerned that Turkey's democracy is backsliding while strengthening bilateral relations with Russia.

The EU leaders threatened sanctions against Turkey, but vowed to strengthen economic ties with Ankara if it de-escalates tensions in the dispute over gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, the report said.

Earlier on Thursday, European Council President Charles Michel said the EU leaders briefly discussed relations with Russia during Thursday's video conference.

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US Condemns North Korea's Missile Launches - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The United States condemned North Korea's latest missile launches as a violation of UN resolutions and a serious threat to international security, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"The United States condemns the DPRK's [North Korea] destabilizing ballistic missile launches. These launches violate multiple UN Security Council resolutions and threaten the region and the broader international community," the official said in an email.

The spokesperson reiterated that the United States' commitments to the defense of the South Korea and Japan are "ironclad."

"North Korea's unlawful nuclear and ballistic missile programs constitute serious threats to international peace and security and undermine the global nonproliferation regime," the spokesperson said.

North Korea's latest ballistic missile launches were first reported by the Japanese security forces last night and condemned by US President Joe Biden during his first official press conference earlier on Thursday. Biden vowed to respond accordingly if North Korea chooses to escalate.

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More Than 17,000 Unaccompanied Migrant Children in US Custody - Biden Administration

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - A total of 17,056 migrant children who came to the United States without a parent or a legal guardian are currently under the care of the US government, the Biden administration revealed in new data.

Data released on Thursday by the departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Homeland Security (DHS) showed that as of Wednesday, a total of 11,900 asylum-seeking migrant children are in care facilities run by the HHS and another 5,156 are under the custody of Customs and Border Protection.

Earlier on Thursday, the Biden administration announced it is opening a ninth temporary facility in San Antonio, Texas, to hold an additional 2,400 unaccompanied migrant children.

The Biden administration has opened temporary care facilities in Dallas, Pecos and Midland, two in the US military bases near El Paso and San Antonio and two in Carrizo Springs - all in Texas - as well as another one in San Diego, California.

The Biden administration said the nine facilities provide enough space to accommodate 15,602 migrant children.

The United States is experiencing the greatest influx of undocumented migrants arriving via its border with Mexico in the past 20 years, according to reports.

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Canada's Auditor General Says Public Health Agency Ill Prepared for COVID-19

TORONTO, March 25 (Sputnik) - The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) was underprepared for the coronavirus pandemic, the country's Auditor General said in a report.

"The agency was not adequately prepared to respond to the pandemic, and it underestimated the potential impact of the virus at the onset of the pandemic," the report on Thursday.

The report found that the agency was plagued by long-standing health surveillance information issues, which contributed to co-ordinational difficulties between federal and provincial authorities, as well as by an outdated information technology infrastructure.

The report also noted that despite moving quickly, in coordination with the Canadian Border Services Agency, to implement the quarantine requirements for those entering the country, the agency did not know whether two-thirds of quarantined individuals actually complied with the order.

The Auditor General recommended that the agency take steps to modernize its information technology systems and make improvements to the quarantine enforcement infrastructure.

In a joint statement following the release of the report, Canada's Health Minister Patty Hajdu and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Bill Blair thanked the Auditor General for the report and vowed to implement all of the recommendations.

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US Sentences 2 Ukrainians for Trafficking Fake Cancer, Hepatitis Drugs - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - A US court has sentenced two Ukrainian citizens to prison terms after they pleaded guilty to trafficking fake cancer and Hepatitis drugs into the United States, the Justice Department said.

"Two citizens of Ukraine have been sentenced for trafficking in and smuggling into the United States counterfeit cancer and hepatitis drugs," the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday. "Nienadov and Nikolaienko were sentenced to respective terms of 71 and 33 months in federal prison. Each defendant is expected to face removal proceedings following his term in prison."

Maksym Nienadov, who also admitted to introducing misbranded drugs into the United States, was the owner of the Ukrainian-based company Healthy Nation while his co-conspirator, Volodymyr Nikolaienko was an employee, the release said.

The defendants were arrested in April 2019 upon their arrival to the US from Ukraine to discuss future sales of fake drugs and as of today remain in US custody, the release added.

Nienadov and Nikolaienko pleaded guilty on July 17, 2020 following the months-long communication with undercover US agents about the purchase of fake Keytruda, Abraxane and Eplclusa drugs that started in June of 2018. All delivered drugs appeared to be counterfeit after the original manufacturers examined them.

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UN Releases \$14Mln Emergency Aid For Rohingya Refugees Left Homeless by Fire

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Emergency aid of \$14 million will allow Rohingya refugees to begin rebuilding 10,000 shelters destroyed by fire, while providing food, water and other humanitarian aid, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a press release.

"This fire has ripped through one of the most vulnerable communities in the world. Rohingya refugees need our support now more than ever, as the pandemic continues to take its toll and they approach the monsoon season," UN Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock said in the press release on Thursday.

Estimates indicate that Monday's fire displaced more than 45,000 mostly Rohingya refugees, originally from neighboring Myanmar, with many more affected. A hospital and other critical health, nutrition and education structures were also destroyed, the release said.

The \$14 million from the UN Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF) will also provide water and sanitation services, food, mental and psycho-social health assistance and other emergency services, the release added.

At least 11 people died in the blaze, more than 500 people were injured and about 400 people remain missing, according to the release.

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Some 111 People Died in Texas Due to Severe Winter Storm in February - State Health Agency EL PASO, March 25 (Sputnik) - Some 111 people in the US state of Texas died due to the severe winter storm in February, according to data from the Texas Department of State Health Services.

"The majority of verified deaths were associated with hypothermia," the agency said in a statement on Thursday. "There have also been multiple deaths caused by motor vehicle accidents, carbon monoxide poisoning, medical equipment failure, exacerbation of chronic illness, lack of home oxygen, falls, and fire."

The confirmed deaths occurred between February 11 and March 5, the agency said. A majority of the winter-related deaths, 31, occurred in the Houston metroplex area, data showed.

In February, a severe winter storm hit several US states of which Texas was particularly affected. The storm caused prolonged power outages as well as food and water shortages for millions of residents.

The freezing temperatures left up to 4 million Texans without power for period of several days.

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California Expands Coronavirus Vaccines to Residents Age 16 or Older - Governor

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Every resident of California who reaches the age of 16 will become eligible for a coronavirus vaccine on April 15, Governor Gavin Newsom said.

"With vaccine supply increasing and by expanding eligibility to more Californians, the light at the end of the tunnel continues to get brighter," Newsom said in a press release on Thursday. "We remain focused on equity as we extend vaccine eligibility to those 50 and over starting April 1, and those 16 and older starting April 15."

California expects its current allocation of 1.8 million first and second vaccine doses per week to increase to 2.5 million in the first half of April and 3 million doses in the second half of the month, the release said.

The state also plans increased allocations of vaccines to providers in the hardest-hit communities, typically those with large minority populations, the release added.

Of the three vaccines authorized by the US Food and Drug Administration, only the Pfizer-BioNTech jab is approved for 16- and 17-year-olds, while people must be at least 18 to qualify for the vaccines produced by Moderna and Johnson & Johnson.

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US Earmarks \$128Mln For Effort to Cut Solar Power Cost 60% Over Next Decade - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The United States will invest \$128 million in a ten-year program targeting a 60 percent reduction in the cost of solar generated electricity in a bid to create a clean power grid, the Energy Department said in a press release.

"In many parts of the country, solar is already cheaper than coal and other fossil fuels, and with more innovation we can cut the cost again by more than half within the decade," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in the release on Thursday.

Plans include an effort to achieve a utility-scale breakthrough in solar power in the next five years, with the goal of slashing the current cost of 4.6 cents per kilowatt hour (kWh) to 3 cents by 2025 and 2 cents by 2030, the release said.

The \$128 million includes \$40million for 22 projects to research perovskites, a family of emerging solar materials that have potential to make highly efficient thin-film solar cells with very low production costs, the release added.

Trimming solar energy cost is crucial to achieve President Joe Biden's goal of achieving a 100 percent "clean" US power grid by 2035, according to the release.

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REVIEW - Biden Announces Bid for Reelection, Vows to Contain China in First Presser

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced plans to run for re-election in 2024 and vowed to contain China's quest for global dominance during his first long-awaited official press conference.

During the hour and two minutes of the White House event Biden took questions from 10 out of 30 socially distanced reporters on Thursday. He defended his handling of the migrants influx, doubled his vaccination pledge and admitted that US troops are likely to stay in Afghanistan beyond the May 1 deadline.

Biden, who is 78 years old, produced the biggest political sensation of the show by disclosing his intention to run for a second term in 2024 on a ticket with his current Vice President Kamala Harris.

"My plan is to run for re-election. That is my expectation," Biden said.

EARLY SUCCESSES

Before exposing himself to reporters' grilling Biden boasted major accomplishments of the first 65 days of his presidency, which included 100 million in \$1,400 relief checks sent to Americans and the same number of vaccines against COVID-19 administered on his watch.

"On December 8 I indicated that I hope to get 100 million shots in people's arms in my first 100 days. We met that goal last week by day 58, 42 days ahead of schedule," Biden said. "Today, I am setting a second goal that by my 100th day in office we will have administered 200 million shots in people's arms."

He cited unnamed economic forecasters who significantly increased projections on US economic growth - to over 6 percent. Biden, who has recently pushed his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package through Congress, vowed to unveil soon another big economic initiative - a plan to overhaul the country's physical and technological infrastructure.

MIGRATION CRISIS

However it was a growing number of migrants seeking to enter the US from Mexico that topped the agenda of the press conference.

Replying to journalists, who returned to the issue many times in multiple contexts, Biden downplayed the significance of the spike and attributed it to seasonal factors, calamities in Latin America and his predecessor's mismanagement rather than his own liberal migration policies.

"There is a significant increase in the number of people coming to the border in the winter months of January, February, March. It happens every year," Biden said.

He accused Donald Trump of halting funds to deal with root causes of migration and dismantling the migration infrastructure.

"I can't guarantee we're going to solve everything, but I can guarantee we're going to make it better," Biden said.

He promised not to let migrant children starve to death at the border, but assured that the overwhelming majority of people are being sent back. Biden also took aim at Mexico for refusing to allow migrant families back. Top-level consultations are already underway and things will soon change, he promised.

The US is experiencing the greatest influx of illegal immigrants in the past 20 years with reports of at least 15,000 unaccompanied children kept in custody. Some 5,000 of them are being held at Customs and Border Protection facilities not designed for long-term housing.

Biden explained that 70 percent of minors are 16-17 years old and promised that as early as next week the first thousand will be more conveniently accommodated.

OVERSEAS CONCERNS

Biden warned that China seeks to become the leading, the wealthiest and the most powerful nation in the world and promised that it won't happen "on his watch." The president said that his administration seeks no confrontation with the Chinese, but expects steep competition.

"We are not looking for confrontation, although we know there will be steep, steep competition... China has an overall goal to become a leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the world, the most powerful country in the world. This is not going to happen on my watch," Biden said.

He promised to face the challenge by beefing up US economic and technological potential, reinforcing alliances and promoting American values globally. Biden described the stand-off with China as a competition between autocracy and democracy.

He accused North Korea of violating UN Resolution 1718 by its recent ballistic missile test and threatened "to respond accordingly" if the country chooses to escalate.

"We are consulting with our allies and partners, and there will be responses. If they choose to escalate, we will respond accordingly " Biden said.

He signaled that some form of diplomacy remains an option, "but it has to be conditioned upon the end result of denuclearization."

Biden admitted that it will be hard to meet the May 1 deadline to withdraw troops from Afghanistan pledged by Trump. The US president said, however, that he does not intend to keep forces there for long and is consulting with allies to have a safe and orderly pullout.

"We will leave, the question is when we leave." Biden said adding that he does not expect to have US troops in Afghanistan next year.

During the press conference he once mentioned Russia and its President Vladimir Putin - both times in the context of the US-China competition.

Biden had little to offer to those who expected from him gaffes and other possible signs of age-related frailty. He convened the press conference on day 65 of his presidency - later than any US president over the last hundred years. By this point Donald Trump and George H.W. Bush had each held five press conferences, Bill Clinton four, George W. Bush three, Barack Obama two and Ronald Reagan one, US media estimated.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) -

BIDEN'S FIRST PRESS CONFERENCE

* US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he is not looking for a confrontation with China, but expects steep competition with a country that he vowed will not become the world's leading power on his watch.

* Biden said the United States is in discussions with allies and partners on North Korea after Pyongyang conducted missile tests earlier this week and vowed to "respond accordingly" in case Pyongyang chooses to escalate the situation.

* Biden said he is willing to do "some form of diplomacy" with North Korea, but conditioned any talks by reaching the end result of the country's denuclearization.

* Biden said the United States may not meet the May 1 deadline to withdraw troops from Afghanistan due to tactical issues.

* The United States and Mexico will discuss the problem of migrants rejected at the US southern border not returning home, Biden said.

IMF-ARGENTINA TALKS

* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Argentina are holding technical discussions on securing a new loan package for the country, IMF spokesman Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

* IMF and the Argentine authorities made progress in talks over the fund's support program, respective missions chiefs Julie Kozack and Luis Cubeddu said in a joint statement.

RUSSIA'S POLICY ON ARCTIC

* In recent years, Russia has succeeded in increasing the security of the Arctic, creating troops capable of effectively responding to external threats, Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev said.

* Russia seeks to preserve the Arctic as a peaceful territory, but some countries do not abandon their attempts to weaken Russia's position, they are trying to increase military activity and boost sanctions pressure, Medvedev said.

TURKEY-RUSSIA DEFENSE MINISTERS TALKS

* Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and his Turkish counterpart, Hulusi Akar, on Thursday discussed the situation in Syria and the work of the joint commission on ceasefire violations, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Akar said that he held a phone conversation with Shoigu and sides agreed to work on preventing ceasefire violations in Syria's Idlib province.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST MYANMAR

* The United States imposed new sanctions on two conglomerates in Myanmar in its latest action in response to the military coup in the country, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

* The United Kingdom announced additional steps against Myanmar's armed forces and imposed sanctions against military-owned conglomerate Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd over its involvement in "human rights violations."

AFGHANISTAN TALKS

* The only acceptable outcome of the ongoing inter-Afghan peace negotiations would be the establishment of a permanent, "pure Islamic" government for the war-torn country, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Sputnik on Thursday.

* The Kabul administration's claims that the Taliban has increased violence recently are not true as the movement in fact is conducting "much less" operations this year when compared to 2020, Mujahid told Sputnik.

* The latest round of negotiations within the extended Troika format, which Moscow hosted earlier this month, was generally positive, allowing the Afghan government and the Taliban to foster a sense of understanding and build trust, Mujahid told Sputnik.

UKRAINE MILITARY STRATEGY

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy approved the military security strategy of Ukraine, which provides for the country's membership in NATO, the end of the temporary "occupation" of part of the territory of Ukraine by Russia as well as the country's readiness to contain aggression, but does not provide for the achievement of military parity with Russia.

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NASA Invests \$45Mln in 365 Proposals From US Small Businesses - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Some 365 small businesses, many minority or women owned, will receive initial funding for technology projects in a \$45 million program announced by NASA on Thursday.

"NASA selected proposals to receive funding based on their technical merit and commercial potential. The selections span the breadth of NASA missions to empower the agency's work in human exploration, space technology, science, and aeronautics," the US space agency said in a press release.

The firms operate in 38 US states, Washington, DC and Puerto Rico and include women-owned, minority-owned and veteran-owned small businesses, as well as Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) and other types of research organizations, the release said. Funding recipients cited in the release include Synchronic, a woman-owned small firm and first-time NASA awardee based the state of Connecticut. The firm will develop radiation tolerant, high-voltage, high-power diodes, a technology needed to manage and distribute power. Another grantee, Qubittek in the state of California will partner with the University of New Mexico, a Hispanic-serving institution. Together, they will develop a compact hardware package that provides a reliable calibration tool for detectors of quantum-sized information, the release said.

More than 30 percent of the awards announced on Thursday will go to first-time recipients of NASA funding, the release added.

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US Envoy for Yemen Visiting Middle East for Meetings With Senior Officials - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking is travelling the Middle East to hold discussions with senior government officials in the region, the State Department said in a statement on Thursday.

"Lenderking will travel back to the Middle East starting on March 25 for meetings with senior government officials in coordination with UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths," the statement said.

The US Special Envoy will focus attention on the international efforts to promote a lasting ceasefire and peace agreement in Yemen as well as on efforts to address the country's humanitarian crisis, the statement added.

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Biden Administration Opens 9th Facility to House Migrant Children - US Refugee Agency

EL PASO, March 25 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is opening the ninth temporary facility to hold up to 2,400 migrant children who came to the United States without a legal guardian, an Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) spokesperson said on Thursday.

"HHS [Health and Human Service Department] has selected with the assistance of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) the Freeman Expo Center in San Antonio, Texas, as an Emergency Intake Site (EIS) for up to 2,400 children," the spokesperson said in a statement. The Biden administration has opened temporary such facilities in Dallas, Pecos and Midland, two in the US military bases near El Paso and San Antonio, and two in Carrizo Springs - all in Texas - and another one in San Diego, California.

The nine facilities provide enough space to accommodate 15,602 migrant children.

HHS said in a recent press release that as of Tuesday at least 11,551 migrant children are under its custody and at least 4,962 migrant children are under the custody of US Customs and Border Protection.

The United States is experiencing the greatest influx of undocumented migrants arriving via its border with Mexico in the past 20 years.

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US Sentences 2 Ukrainians for Trafficking Fake Cancer, Hepatitis Drugs - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) – A US court has sentenced two Ukrainian citizens to federal prison terms after they pleaded guilty to trafficking fake cancer and Hepatitis drugs into the United States, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"Two citizens of Ukraine have been sentenced for trafficking in and smuggling into the United States counterfeit cancer and hepatitis drugs," the Justice Department said in a press release.

"Nienadov and Nikolaienko were sentenced to respective terms of 71 and 33 months in federal prison. Each defendant is expected to face removal proceedings following his term in prison."

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US, India to Enhance Digital Tech, Intellectual Property Cooperation- Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The United States and India are enhancing their trade and cooperation on digital technology and intellectual property as well as in a host of other areas, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) Katherine Tai said on Thursday after conducting talks with her Indian Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal.

"Ambassador Tai and Minister Goyal discussed the important trade and investment relationship between the United States and India," the USTR Office said in a statement. "Ambassador Tai emphasized the critical importance of cooperation on a broad set of issues, including digital trade, intellectual property, agriculture, labor and climate and the environment."

The two officials also committed to strengthening bilateral cooperation on shared objectives and the use the US-India Trade Policy Forum to resolve trade issues, the statement said.

The US-India bilateral stands at around \$150 billion a year, with about \$30 billion of that in New Delhi's favor, according to published reports.

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Three B-2 US Bombers, 100 Airmen Arrive to Azores – Strategic Command

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) – Three B-2 US bombers and 100 airmen have arrived at Lajes Field airbase in Azores of Portugal as part of a Bomber Task Force mission, Strategic Command (STRATCOM) said on Thursday.

"Three B-2 Spirit stealth bombers, assigned to the 509th Bomb Wing, Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri, along with more than 100 airmen, civilians and contractors, arrived at Lajes Field to participate in a series of Bomber Task Force missions in the high Northern Europe region," STRATCOM said in a press release.

The command said the deployment of bombers facilitates stability in Europe, since their primary goal is to deter conflict as well as to respond to any other global challenge.

"The [European] theater integration and training with allies, partners and other U.S. military units enhances interoperability capability across the entire theater. This cooperation increases Air Force Global Strike Command's Airmen readiness, and the B-2's ability to respond to and support global operations," the release said.

Earlier this week, two US bombers and four Norwegian F-35s conducted a Bomber Task Force Mission near the coast of Iceland.

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Biden Says Will Invite Alliance of Democracies to US Soon 'To Discuss the Future'

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday during his first press since assuming office in January that he will invite an alliance of democracies to the United States soon to talk about the future.

"Earlier this month, and apparently it got the Chinese attention, that's not why I did it, I met with our allies on how we are going to hold China accountable in the region - Australia, India, Japan and the United States - the so-called Quad - because we have to have democracies, working together," Biden said. "Before too long, I am going to invite an alliance of democracies to come here to discuss the future."

Biden also said later on Thursday he will speak with 27 heads of European Union member states.

Biden's statement comes almost a week after US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with their Chinese counterparts in Alaska. The meeting ended with each side harshly criticizing the other. The US officials criticized China for the events in Hong Kong events and the alleged human rights abuses against the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. The Chinese delegation criticized the United States for human rights abuses of African Americans and others, lack of democracy and interference in other countries affairs.

However, the two sides agreed to push forward high-level dialogue and avoid confrontation. The first high-level engagement with the Chinese under the new US administration was also preceded by the Quad summit - Biden's virtual meeting with leaders of Australia, Japan and India.

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China Processed More Crude Oil Than US for Most of 2020 - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - China's monthly oil refinery output topped the US for the first time ever in April 2020, starting a trend that held for the rest of the year with the exception of two months, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in a report on Thursday.

"For most of 2020, China's refineries processed more crude oil than US refineries," the release said. "China processed more crude oil than the United States not only because of the unique effects of COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions in 2020, but also because of differences in the longer-term structural refining trends between the two countries."

The report attributed much of the shift to reduced demand for gasoline, jet fuel and other petroleum products due to COVID-19, which hit the US in April and continued for the remainder of 2020.

Chinese refinery runs continue to grow, in part because government set prices for refined petroleum products above the cost of crude oil, giving refineries an incentive to boost production, the report said.

Meanwhile, US refinery runs have yet to return to March 2020 levels, with the COVID-19 slowdown exacerbated by four hurricanes from August to October 2021 that shut down refineries on the Gulf of Mexico coast, according to the report.

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Biden Says May Act to Restrict US Senate Filibuster

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signaled on Thursday that he is ready to curtail the legislative filibuster in the Senate if it keeps impeding his agenda. During his first formal news conference Biden said he is in favor of reducing allowed obstructionist procedures to their original form of lengthy speeches, but warned that he may go beyond that.

"I believe we should go back to a position... that existed just when I came to the United States Senate 120 years ago," he said. "You had to stand there and talk and talk and talk and talk until you collapse. And guess what? People got tired of talking and tired of collapsing... I strongly support moving in that direction."

Biden added that the filibuster is "being abused in a gigantic way" by his opponents in the Senate where the Democrats have a one-vote majority.

"I am a fairly practical guy. I want to get things done. I want to get them done consistent with what we promised to the American people. And in order to do that in a 50-50 Senate we have to get to the place where I get 50 votes so that the Vice President of the United States can break the tie or I get 51 votes without her," Biden said.

He threatened more radical measures "if there is a complete lockdown and chaos as a consequence of the filibuster." Biden didn't elaborate.

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US Senate Extends Small Business Pandemic Relief

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday voted in favor of extending a pandemic assistance program for small businesses that was set expire at the end of the month. The upper chamber voted to extend the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) until May 31 by a 92-7 margin, according to results posted by the Senate.

President Joe Biden is expected to sign the bill which will be appended to the administration's \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan passed earlier this month to deal with the protracted coronavirus crisis.

The PPP was originally enacted a year ago under the \$3 trillion CARES Act of the Trump administration that was passed to rescue the US economy from the COVID-19. The primary function of the paycheck program is to ensure that businesses, particularly the small- to

medium-sized ones that support the bulk of working America, are able to survive the economic fallout from the pandemic.

Since its inception, the PPP has been extended more than once, to adapt to the additional \$900 billion approved under the CARES Act in December and now to the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan.

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IMF, Argentina Make Progress in Talks Over Support Program - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Argentine authorities made progress in talks over the fund's support program, respective missions chiefs Julie Kozack and Luis Cubeddu said in a joint statement on Thursday.

"The Argentine authorities and the IMF team made progress in defining some key principles that could underpin an economic program to help address Argentina's near- and medium-term challenges," the statement said.

Both sides expressed the need for macroeconomic sustainability and for safeguarding the post-COVID recovery underway.

"There was agreement that inflation is a multifaceted phenomenon, and that reducing it requires both consistent macroeconomic policies and coordination efforts to help anchor inflation expectations," they said.

The IMF and Argentina have recognized the importance of policies to boost export and productivity.

"The IMF team and the Argentine authorities will continue working together with a view to deepening their understandings in these key areas."

IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice said earlier on Thursday that Argentine Economy Minister Martin Guzman visited the fund this week. Both sides continue technical discussions, he added.

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Biden Says North Korea Violated UN Resolution 1718 By Conducting Latest Missile Tests

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday during his first press since assuming office that North Korea has violated United Nations Resolution 1718 by conducting missile tests earlier this week.

Earlier in the day, Tokyo said two North Korea ballistic missiles fell just outside of Japan's exclusive economic zone and accused Pyongyang of violating resolutions of the UN Security Council.

"UN Resolution 1718 was violated by those particular missiles that were tested," Biden said.

Biden underscored that the United States is in discussions with allies and partners on North Korea and vowed to "respond accordingly" in case Pyongyang chooses to escalate the situation.

"We are consulting with our allies and partners, and there will be responses. If they choose to escalate, we will respond accordingly," Biden said.

Biden also stressed that he is willing to do "some form of diplomacy" with North Korea, but conditioned any talks by reaching the end result of the country's denuclearization.

"I am also prepared for some form of diplomacy, but it has to be conditioned upon the end result of denuclearization," Biden said.

UN Resolution 1718, adopted in 2016, bans North Korea from conducting further nuclear tests or launching ballistic missiles.

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Biden Says US Sending Vast Majority of Migrants Back Home

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday during his first press conference since assuming office in January that the vast majority of migrants coming into the United States via the US southern border with Mexico are being sent back home.

"The vast majority, the overwhelming majority of people coming to the border and crossing are being sent back," Biden said. "Thousands, tens of thousands of people who are over 18 years of age and single people... have been sent back, sent home. We are sending back the vast majority of the families that are coming."

The United States is experiencing the greatest influx of illegal immigrants in the past 20 years with reports of at least 15,000 unaccompanied children being taken in US custody and kept in squalid conditions.

Some 5,000 of the unaccompanied children are being held at Customs and Border Protection facilities not designed for long-term housing.

The latest surge followed a series of executive orders by Biden to overturn most of the border control measures imposed by his predecessor Donald Trump that largely stopped illegal immigration.

Images released this week by border officials show hundreds of migrants with cellophane and metallic foil blankets sitting on the floors of cage-like structures reminiscent of those used by the Trump and Obama administrations.

More than 100,000 migrants attempted to enter the United States in February, according to data from the Customs and Border Protection agency.

Republicans and some media outlets have called the situation concerning the influx of migrants a "border crisis" and have criticized the Biden administration for not allowing the media access to migrant facilities or otherwise frustrating reporting on the issue of the influx of migrants.

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Biden Says US Not Looking for Confrontation With China, But Expects 'Steep Competition'

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he is not looking for a confrontation with China, but expects steep competition with a country that he vowed will not become the world's leading power on his watch.

"We're not looking for confrontation, although we know there will be steep-competition," Biden said in his first press conference since assuming office in January. "China has an overall goal to become a leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the world, the most powerful country in the world. This is not going to happen on my watch."

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Biden Says US Troops Unlikely to Remain in Afghanistan Next Year

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday said that he does not intend to keep troops in Afghanistan for a long time.

"It is not my intention to stay there for a long time," Biden told reporters, adding that he does not expect to have US troops there next year. "We will leave, the question is when we leave."

Biden also said the US would leave Afghanistan in a safe and orderly way.

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Biden Sets New Goal of Administering 200M In Coronavirus Vaccines Within First 100 Days

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday during his first press conference since assuming office in January that his administration aims to administer 200 million coronavirus vaccines within the first 100 days of his presidency.

"On December 8 I indicated that I hope to get 100 million shots in people's arms in my first 100 days. We met that goal last week by day 58, 42 days ahead of schedule," Biden said. "Today, I am setting a second goal that by my 100th day in office we will have administered 200 million shots in people's arms."

Biden said the United States will meet on Friday his key goal of administering 100 million coronavirus vaccine doses.

The US president noted that there has been a significant increase in the number of vaccinated senior citizens throughout the United States.

The number of novel coronavirus cases in the United States has surpassed 30 million, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

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US Consulting With Allies on N. Korea, Will Respond if Pyongyang Escalates - Biden

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday during his first press conference since assuming office in January that the United States is in discussions with allies and partners on North Korea after Pyongyang conducted missile tests earlier this week and vowed to "respond accordingly" in case Pyongyang chooses to escalate the situation. "We are consulting with our allies and partners, and there will be responses. If they choose to escalate, we will respond accordingly " Biden said.

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Biden Says Prepared for 'Some Form of Diplomacy' With North Korea

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday during his first press conference since assuming office that he is willing to do "some form of diplomacy" with North Korea, but conditioned any talks by reaching the end result of the country's denuclearization.

"I am also prepared for some form of diplomacy, but it has to be conditioned upon the end result of denuclearization," Biden said.

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Biden Says US May Not Meet May 1 Deadline to Withdraw Troops From Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Thursday the United States may not meet the May 1 deadline to withdraw troops from Afghanistan due to tactical issues.

"It is going to be hard to meet the May 1 deadline in terms of tactical reasons," Biden said when asked about the US troop exit from Afghanistan.

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Biden Says North Korea Violated UN Resolution 1718 By Conducting Latest Missile Tests

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" UN Resolution 1718 was violated by those particular missiles that were tested," Biden said.

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US, EU Agree to Intensify Negotiations on Data Flows Protection - Commerce Secretary

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The United States and the European Union have agreed to intensify negotiations to enhance the Privacy Shield network guarding Transatlantic data flows between citizens, economies and societies, US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo said in a statement on Thursday.

"The US government and the European Commission have decided to intensify negotiations on an enhanced EU-US Privacy Shield framework to comply with the July 16, 2020 judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union in the Schrems II case," the statement said.

The Schrems II case, initiated by the Irish Data Protection Commission, argued that the EU standard contractual clauses for the transfer of personal data to processors outside the bloc did not have adequate protection because they lacked safeguards against US government surveillance and therefore violated the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Raimondo said the US-EU partnership on data flows protection is supposed to facilitate economic recovery after the coronavirus pandemic ends.

The EU-US Privacy Shield framework is a mechanism that allows companies on both sides of the Atlantic to comply with data protection requirements when transferring personal data from the EU to the US.

On July 16, 2020, the European Court of Justice declared the EU-US Privacy Shield framework invalid as part of the Schrems II case.

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Biden Says US Sends Vast Majority of Migrants Back Home

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday said the vast majority of migrants coming to the US southern border are being sent back home.

"The vast majority, the overwhelming majority of people coming to the border and crossing are being sent back," Biden said during his first press conference as president. "Thousands, tens of thousands of people who are over 18 years of age and single people... have been sent back, sent home. We are sending back the vast majority of the families that are coming."

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Blinken in Call With Yemen's Prime Minister Stresses Need for Ceasefire - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalek Saeed spoke about the peace process in Yemen including the need for a ceasefire, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement after the call on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken welcomed the Republic of Yemen Government's support for a comprehensive, nationwide ceasefire and UN-led political talks and its continued engagement with UN Special Envoy Griffiths," Price said. "He [Secretary Blinken] stressed the need for a ceasefire and a durable and inclusive peace agreement to enable full economic recovery and to address the humanitarian crisis."

Blinken thanked Saeed for his authorization of the arrival of four ships with fuel at the Hudaydah port to mitigate the fuel shortage in Yemen, the statement added.

The secretary also encouraged Yemeni parties to work toward full implementation of the Riyadh Agreement, according to the statement.

Yemen has been engulfed in an internal conflict between government forces and the Houthis movement since August 2014. A year later, a Saudi-led coalition launched an air campaign against the rebels at the request of President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi. However, the Houthis continue to maintain control over a vast part of the country's north, including the capital of Sanaa.

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Biden Says Economic Forecasters Expect US GDP to Grow by 6% in 2021

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday said economic forecasters expect the nation's gross domestic product to grow by more than 6 percent in 2021. "Majority of economic forecasters have significantly increased projections on economic growth," Biden told reporters during his first press conference since taking office on January 20. "For now, it will exceed 6 percent."

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Next US Senate Session Sure to See Progress on Gun Control Bill - Majority Leader

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - New gun control legislation will be introduced in the US Senate and will be given a full floor debate in the next session scheduled to begin in April, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told a press conference on Capitol Hill on Thursday. "We are going to have a bill and we are going to have a debate on the floor [of the chamber] and we are going to make progress," Schumer told reporters. "My job is to make sure [that] we make progress."

Schumer added that on Thursday afternoon he would meet with Democratic Senators Patty Murphy and Richard Blumenthal to discuss "the best path forward" to advance and pass the proposed gun control legislation. On Tuesday, the Schumer said he had committed to pushing new background check measures.

President Joe Biden has thrown his weight behind the reform measure. However, on Tuesday, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham warned that any efforts by Democrats to pass legislation in Congress banning the sale of assault weapons had no chance of being approved in the Senate in the face of Republican opposition.

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US 'Shocked' by Myanmar Military Killing 27 Protesters Last Weekend - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The US government is shocked that the Myanmar military used lethal force as a result of which at least 27 protesters died over the weekend, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"The United States is shocked and deeply saddened by reports that Burmese security forces continued to use lethal force against the people of Burma [Myanmar] last weekend, resulting in the deaths of at least 27 people, including several children," Price said in a statement.

The United States expresses its deepest condolences to the families and loved ones of all of the victims and it condemned the Myanmar security forces' actions in the strongest terms, the statement said.

"These abhorrent and brutal acts against children, one as young as seven years old who was shot and killed in her home while sitting on her father's lap, further demonstrate the horrific nature of the Burmese military regime's assault on its own people ... The regime cannot govern through terror," Price said.

Also on Thursday, the US government imposed what it described as the most significant sanctions so far since the February 1 coup in Myanmar on two major military-controlled companies that run much of the nation's economy.

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Biden Sets New Goal of Administering 200M In COVID-19 Vaccine Shots Within First 100 Days

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden during his first press conference as US commander-in-chief said the administration aims to administer 200 million COVID-19 vaccine doses within the first 100 days of his presidency.

"On December 8 I indicated that I hope to get 100 million shots in people's arms in my first 100 days. We met that goal last week by day 58, 42 days ahead of schedule," Biden said on Thursday. "Today I am setting a second goal and that is we will by my 100th day in office have administered 200 million shots in people's arms."

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US Senate to Take Up Asian Hate Crimes Bill on April 12 - Majority Leader Schumer

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The Senate will begin consideration of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act when it reconvenes next month, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told a press conference on Capitol Hill Thursday

"On April 12, the first item [the Senate will consider is] Asian hate crimes legislation," Schumer said.

His comment came two days after he publicly threw his support behind the bill, which was introduced by Senator Mazie Hirono of Hawaii and Congresswoman Grace Meng of New York. The push comes after a shooting in Atlanta last week left eight people dead, including six women of Asian descent. However, no motive has yet been established by US authorities. The legislation would create a position at the Department of Justice to focus on reviewing COVID-19-related hate crimes and provide financial and other resources to state and local law enforcement agencies dealing with them.

The official would also work with local and federal agencies to crack down on and eliminate racially discriminatory language used to describe the pandemic.

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Biden's Backers in US Senate Say They Aim to Reintroduce Emission Law Rescinded By Trump

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Lawmakers aligned to President Joe Biden's Democratic Party announced that they have introduced a resolution to reinstate Obama-era controls on oil-and-gas related methane emissions that former President Donald Trump rescinded.

"Proud to introduce this resolution today with Senator Angus King, Senator [Ed] Markey and other Senate Democrats to reinstate responsible methane emission standards, which is critical to confronting the climate crisis and reducing harmful air pollution," US Senator Martin Heinrich said via Twitter.

The three senators filed a resolution to get the 1996 Congressional Review Act (CRA) reapproved with a simple majority in the Senate, where Biden and his allies effectively have 51 votes versus the 50 held by rival Republicans.

Trump rescinded in August the 2020 CRA requirements on the transmission and storage of methane and volatile organic compounds released from oil and gas production.

The resolution comes as the Biden administration pushes to halve US emissions by 2030 under its target set under the Paris Climate Agreement.

The tussle on energy and emission reforms has drawn Biden into a wider political and legal battle, with attorney generals of 14 Republican-run states filing a lawsuit on Wednesday against the president's moratorium on new drilling for oil and gas leases on public lands and waters.

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Engineered Immune Cells Keep Cancer From Spreading in Lab Tests - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US scientists have managed to dramatically slow the spread of cancer to healthy organs in laboratory mice by genetically altering immune cells, a new approach in treating the deadly disease, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) said on Thursday.

"This is a novel approach to immunotherapy that appears to have promise as a potential treatment for metastatic cancer," leader of the NCI study Rosandra Kaplan said in a press release.

The study capitalized on a 2005 discovery by Kaplan of pre-metastatic niches in healthy organs. Before cancer spreads, it sends out signals that get distant sites ready for the cancer's arrival, the release said.

The NCI team mainly studied mice implanted with rhabdomyosarcoma, a type of cancer that develops in the muscles of children and often spreads to the lungs. The mice were then treated with Myeloid that had been genetically modified to attack the pre-metastatic niches, the release said.

Mice treated with the altered cells had less metastatic cancer in the lungs, smaller tumors in the muscle and they lived substantially longer than mice treated with non modified Myeloid cells.

The researchers found similar results when they studied mice with pancreatic tumors that spread to the liver, the release said.

The team plans to test the safety of genetically altered human Myeloid cells in a clinical trial of adults with cancer and, if it proves to be safe, in children and adolescents with cancer, the release added.

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Nearly 75% Americans Concerned Over Energy Security - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Nearly three quarters of Americans are increasingly feeling insecure about energy availability, a Gallup poll revealed on Thursday. The survey showed 73 percent of American adults are worried about the availability and affordability of energy, a spike of 20 points from a year ago. More than a third of Americans describe the energy situation as "very serious," up from 25 percent in 2018, a release accompanying the poll added. Over half of Americans reckon the US will face a critical energy shortage in the next five years versus 32 percent of those who held this view in 2016, according to the poll. The survey was conducted between March 1-15 among 1,010 adults and reflects the major February energy outage in Texas as millions of state residents found themselves without any energy during extremely cold weather conditions.

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Over Half of Likely US Voters Support Biden Handling of Coronavirus Pandemic - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - A slim majority of American voters approves of President Joe Biden's management of the coronavirus pandemic, a new poll by Rasmussen Reports revealed on Thursday.

"[Fifty-three percent] 53 percent of likely US voters approve of President Biden's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, including 35 percent who Strongly Approve. Forty-four percent (44 percent) of voters disapprove of how Biden is handling the pandemic, including 29 percent who Strongly Disapprove," a press release explaining the poll said.

As with most polls, the results reflect the US political divide, with political polarization, with Biden winning approval from 79 percent of Democrat voters, the release said.

On the Republican side 68 percent they "disapprove" Biden's pandemic strategy, including 50 percent who "strongly disapprove." Just 28 percent said they approved, the release added.

Over 130 million Americans have been vaccinated against the coronavirus so far, about 100 million in Biden's first two months in office. Biden plans to set a new goal of inoculating 200 million Americans in his first 100 days on the job - double his original target, according to media reports.

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Russia to Promote Holding Mideast Quartet Meeting With Regional Actors - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, March 25 (Sputnik) - Russia will continue talks about organizing a meeting of the Middle East Quartet - comprised of the United Nations, European Union, United States and Russia - with the participation of regional countries that can possibly include Saudi Arabia,

Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

"We are committed to continuing discussions with the interested sides to consider convening a meeting of the Quartet plus Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, plus Palestinians and Israelis, with the possible inclusion of Saudi Arabia as the author of the Arab Peace Initiative," Polyanskiy said during a UN Security Council meeting.

The Russian diplomat explained that such a meeting could provide a review of the current situation and identify the main paths of cooperation to overcome the impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian settlement process.

"We hope this idea will enjoy broad support and encourage all the interested sides to share their comments and proposals to ensure thorough preparatory work for the meeting," Polyanskiy said.

Russia proposed to explore organizing a ministerial meeting of a similar format during the most recent virtual conference of the Quartet members on March 23, he added.

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Surging US Imports Will Be Locomotive to Global Economic Recovery - Fed Vice Chair

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Surging US imports will likely lead the world's economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, with global growth expected to be more synchronized this year, Federal Reserve Vice Chairman Richard Clarida said on Thursday.

The US economy is projected to grow at its fastest pace this year since 1984, with a 6.5 percent expansion in gross domestic product growth versus a 2020 decline of 3.5 percent, Clarida said at an event.

"I would be remiss if I did not highlight that if these projections for US economic activity are realized, rising US imports will serve as an important source of external demand to the rest of the world this year and beyond," he added.

The deputy head of the US central bank also said that despite the challenges of COVID-19, "downside risks to the economy are reduced", at least in the United States, and that he expected a "globally synchronized recovery this year."

Clarida disputed the notion that inflation pressures will overwhelm the economy.

"I disagree that fiscal support this year poses a long-term upward risk to inflation. There is slack in the economy, and over time (the) impact of the package will diminish," he said.

He said there will likely be inflation this year after the 2020 collapse in price pressures forced by the pandemic, citing "pent-up demand". But he stressed that the Fed will act to keep inflation expectations anchored at its long-running target of 2% while "broad financial conditions remain very accommodative".

Clarida, however, said full economic recovery will be signaled by progress on the jobs front.

The Labor Department reported on Thursday that some 684,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, the lowest number since the COVID-19 breakout a year ago, suggesting the jobs market may finally be turning the corner with the pandemic.

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 may have not returned, data shows.

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

Clarida acknowledged that the labor market was "still in a deep hole" and that it was important to focus on getting to maximum employment.

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UN, Ethiopia's Rights Commission Will Probe Alleged Abuses in Tigray - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, March 25 (Sputnik) - The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said in a statement on Thursday that they will conduct a joint investigation into the alleged human rights violations committed in the Tigray region.

"The EHRC and OHCHR have been monitoring closely the human rights situation since the start of the conflict on November 4, 2020," the statement said. "Both organizations remain concerned about the reports of serious human rights violations and abuses and the devastating impact of the conflict on the civilian population. With multiple actors involved in the conflict and the gravity of the reported violations, an objective, independent investigation is urgently required."

The deployment of the investigative team will start as soon as possible for an initial period of three months, the statement said.

Earlier on Thursday, Doctors Without Borders said that its staff witnessed at least four civilians dragged off buses and killed by Ethiopian soldiers in the embattled Tigray region.

The office of the UN Secretary-General called the reports of the executions "horrifying" and said the incident must be looked into.

Ethiopia's northernmost region of Tigray has been volatile since early November when the federal government accused the Tigray People's Liberation Front party of attacking a local military base and launched a security operation there.

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US Announces \$15Mln in Humanitarian Aid to Palestinians in West Bank, Gaza - State Dept

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has allocated \$15 million in humanitarian aid for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the US State Department announced in a release on Thursday.

"The US government is pleased to announce \$15 million in humanitarian assistance for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip," the release said. The US Agency for

International Development (USAID) is providing these funds to address the most urgent, life-saving humanitarian needs in the West Bank and Gaza."

The State Department noted that with the announced aid is in support of the COVID-19 response efforts in health care facilities as well as communities in the West Bank and Gaza. "This assistance is also supporting emergency food assistance programming in communities facing food insecurity, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic," the release said. "This small step in advancing the well-being of the Palestinian people is fully in keeping with American values."

The Palestinian Health Ministry said on Sunday that it has started a mass immunization program against the novel coronavirus.

Last week, Palestine received a batch of over 60,000 coronavirus vaccine doses - 38,000 doses of Pfizer and another 24,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccines - via the COVAX distribution facility. In late February, the Palestinian government received 20,000 doses of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine as a gift from the United Arab Emirates.

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Democrats Plan to Fast Track Voting Rights Act in US Senate Next Month - Schumer

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The Democratic majority in the US Senate plans to take up next month the Voting Rights Act already passed by the House of Representatives and push ahead to advance through committee consideration and full debate to bring it for a vote, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday.

"It [Senate] will consider in April voting rights and civil rights, the economy and health," Schumer told a Capitol Hill press conference. "Failure is not an option. A gender justice law also in the pipeline."

The bill would mandate full, automatic registration of all voters in the United States and allow convicted criminals who had served their sentences to vote and impose limits on the measures that state legislatures can pass to eliminate registered voters from their electoral rolls and expand voting by mail, which favored the Democrats in the 2020 elections.

Schumer characterized the legislative measure as being "critical to reforming our democracy" and promised that it would receive "full Senate consideration."

The measure would also encourage early voting and provide funds to state governments to track absentee ballots and for improvements in state voting systems to make it more difficult for them to be hacked and manipulated by outside parties.

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US Announces \$15Mln in Humanitarian Aid to Palestinians in West Bank, Gaza - State Dept

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has allocated \$15 million in humanitarian aid for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the US State Department announced in a release on Thursday.

"The US government is pleased to announce \$15 million in humanitarian assistance for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip," the release said. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) is providing these funds to address the most urgent, life-saving humanitarian needs in the West Bank and Gaza."

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Canada Adds Blood Clot Disclaimer for AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine - Statement

TORONTO, March 25 (Sputnik) - Canadian health regulators on Thursday issued a disclaimer regarding blood clots that may potentially form in individuals who vaccinate with the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine.

Canada's action mirrors that of European health regulators who issued a similar disclaimer admitting that the vaccine's connection to blood clot cases could not be ruled out. The adverse side-effects have prompted a number of European nations to stop vaccinations with the AstraZeneca shot.

"Today, Health Canada updated the product monograph - or label - for the AstraZeneca and COVISHIELD COVID-19 vaccines to provide information on very rare reports of blood clots associated with low levels of blood platelets (i.e., thrombocytopenia) following immunization with the AstraZeneca vaccine," Health Canada said in a statement.

Health Canada is aware of reports that European health officials have identified the cause of the AstraZeneca vaccine complications, the statement said, but the department noted the scarcity of information available about this line of research.

Health Canada added that it has issued guidance for healthcare providers such as warning regarding signs of potential complication, and that it continues to work with international regulators to review all available information.

Deputy Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Howard Njoo told reporters that there have been 2,530 reports of adverse medical events after immunization, with 320 being considered serious, as of March 19.

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US Starts Review of Whether Myanmar Crimes Against Rohingya Constitute Genocide - Official

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has launched a review of whether the actions undertaken by the Myanmar military against the Rohingya Muslim minority

constitute genocide, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scott Busby said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"As I mentioned, the [review] process has begun," Busby told a US Senate subcommittee when asked where the Biden administration stands on whether the actions of the Myanmar military with respect to the Rohingya constitute genocide.

Busby said he cannot get into more details on the issue at this point, but indicated that the State Department is dedicated to see the review process produce an answer soon.

"The Secretary [of State Anthony Blinken] is very committed to the review and to this process, and I think we will have an answer on the not distant future," he said.

Busby also stressed that Washington will continue to do utmost to hold those responsible for the Rohingya suffering accountable.

The Rohingya people, a Muslim ethnic group residing in Myanmar's Rakhine State, have clashed with the country's security forces after the government said it was responding to several violent incidents. Some 740,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh in 2017 during the uptick of violence in Rakhine State.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, some 860,000 Rohingya refugees are currently based in camps in Cox's Bazar district after fleeing violence and persecution in Myanmar.

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Violent Tornado Outbreak Threaten 3 US States Later on Thursday - National Weather Service

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - A significant tornado outbreak with possibly violent winds threatens three states in the south of the United States later on Thursday, the National Weather Service warned in a notice.

"A tornado outbreak - including the threat of a few long-tracked, violent tornadoes - is expected today into early this evening over the Southeast, especially parts of Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee," the notice said.

The National Weather Service explained the high risk warning includes large to very large hail and damaging winds with up to a hurricane force speeds.

Such severe weather is possible over a broad area from the central Gulf Coast to the Ohio Valley and southern Appalachians, the notice also said.

The warning zone includes such major cities, including Nashville, Memphis and Birmingham, the notice added.

About 50 tornadoes hit the same region last week, according to media reports.

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Canada Supreme Court Rules Trudeau Government's Carbon Tax Constitutional

TORONTO, March 25 (Sputnik) - The Supreme Court of Canada ruled on Thursday that the federal government's Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act (GGPPA), better known as the carbon tax, is constitutional.

The Liberal Party of Canada's carbon tax mandate, introduced during the early stages of Prime Minister Trudeau's term in office, has been a point of contention between the federal government and several provinces, including Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan, all of which were parties to the lawsuit.

"The GGPPA is constitutional. It sets minimum national standards of [industrial greenhouse gas] GHG price stringency to reduce GHG emissions. Parliament has jurisdiction to enact this law as a matter of national concern under the peace, order, and good government ("POGG") clause," the Supreme Court of Canada said.

The court said the carbon tax is an internationally agreed upon mechanism to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which it deemed to be an "an existential threat to human life in Canada and around the world," and as such is a matter of national concern - justifying federal jurisdiction over the matter.

The court added that the federal law allows each of the Canadian provinces to implement its own carbon tax plan thus complying with the freedoms awarded to provinces in accordance with the country's federalist structure.

The federal government welcomed the ruling, with Environment and Climate Change Minister Jonathan Wilkinson calling the occasion "historic." Wilkinson said the governing Liberals will look to work with the provinces that took the federal government to court.

Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe issued a statement saying the Supreme Court decision does not change the province's belief that the "federal carbon tax is bad environmental policy, bad economic policy, and simply wrong," vowing to outline measures independent of the "punitive and ineffective" tax imposed by the Trudeau government.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Alberta Premier Jason Kenney, who also led the charge against the carbon tax, have not yet publicly commented on the court's decision.

The Trudeau government has made combating climate change a priority, signing onto the Paris climate accord and even vowing to exceed targets set at the 2016 summit prematurely. The government's efforts have faced strong criticism from both the political left and right, with Trudeau being concurrently accused of consistently missing existing climate targets and undermining the Canadian resource sector.

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UN Mideast Envoy: UNRWA Reached Its Limit, Will Face Serious Cash Flow Crisis in April

UNITED NATIONS, March 25 (Sputnik) - The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has exhausted its resources and will face a severe cash flow crisis unless it receives additional funds, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland said on Thursday.

"By April, the agency will face a serious cash flow crisis. After years of austerity measures and investment inefficiency, the agency has reached its limits. It must receive additional funds to sustain all essential services and support national plans to contain the pandemic, including vaccination roll-out," Wennesland told the UN Security Council.

According to the special coordinator, at the end of 2020, UNRWA narrowly avoided a financial collapse at a time of acute humanitarian needs amid the COVID-19 pandemic and economic hardships. In 2021, UNRWA still lacks more than \$200 million for the core program budget, Wennesland said.

In February, URWA asked for \$1.5 billion to continue running its assistance programs throughout this year. The agency said it did not receive the \$75 million needed to fund its work in 2020.

In 2018, former US President Donald Trump decided to cut the \$300 million in annual funding the United States used to provide to UNRWA.

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US Cyber Command Chief Says Russia Still Focused on Exploiting American Networks, Systems

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US Cyber Command chief Paul Nakasone said on Thursday that Russia remains focused on exploiting the United States' computer networks and systems and on shaping the global narrative despite being publicly exposed and having malicious cyber actors indicted.

"Despite public exposure and indictments of Russian cyber actors, Russia remains focused on shaping the global narrative and exploiting American networks and cyber systems," Nakasone said in a testimony before the US Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

Russia has repeatedly denied the United States' accusations of having engaged in disruptive cyber actions, including most recent SolarWinds hack attack that included multiple US government agencies and more private companies.

Nakasone described Russia as "a sophisticated cyber adversary" with proven abilities for effective operations in the domain.

"Russia is a sophisticated cyber adversary. It has demonstrated its ability to conduct powerful influence campaigns utilizing the medium of social media. Moscow conducts effective cyber-espionage and other operations and has integrated cyber activities into its military and national strategy," he said.

Nakasone testified during the hearing on fiscal year 2022 defense authorization request and the Future Years Defense Program.

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IMF, Argentina Holding Technical Discussions on New Loan Package - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Argentina are holding technical discussions on securing a new loan package for the country, IMF spokesman Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"[Argentine Economy Minister Martin] Guzman was here this week, visiting the Fund with his team, and in fact technical discussions are ongoing as we speak," Rice said during a press briefing.

Rice pointed out that IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva characterized the meeting as being "very good."

"Our teams are working together constructively to help strengthen economic stability and promote sustainable growth," Rice said.

The IMF and Argentina will continue discussions on the possible new loan package in the near future, Rice added.

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Boulder Court Orders Suspect in Colorado Mass Shooting to Be Held Without Bail - Judge

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - A judge ordered the suspect in the deadly Colorado mass shooting at a grocery store earlier this week to be held without bail as the latter made his first appearance in a Boulder court on Thursday.

"You will be held without bail until such time as the court is able to determine whether or not the proof is evident and the presumption is great that you committed these crimes," the judge told 21-year-old Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa.

The suspect, who was wounded during the incident, remained largely silent throughout the hearing and just once replied "yes" to a question whether he understood the judge.

Alissa faces ten charges of first degree murder and one attempted murder charge. He is suspected of shooting dead ten people at a supermarket in Boulder on Monday.

The judge agreed to have a status hearing within two to three months for assessing Alissa's mental state before moving to the trial in earnest.

"Our position is that we can't do anything until we fully assess Mr. Alissa's mental illness. We cannot begin to gauge the nature and depth of Mr. Alissa's mental illness until we have the discovery from the government," Alissa's lawyer said.

The prosecution admitted that they are yet to receive any discovery from the law enforcement and said that additional charges will be filed in the next couple of weeks.

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IMF Starts Discussions on Allocating Additional \$650Bln for COVID-19 Response - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) conducted initial discussions on allocating additional \$650 billion in Special Drawing Rights (SDR) in support of the global COVID-19 recovery, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice said on Thursday.

"We feel that by addressing the long-term global need for reserve assets, a new SDR allocation would benefit all member countries and support the global recovery from COVID-19," Rice said. Rice emphasized that this is only an initial discussion on the matter, noting that IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva has indicated that she would raise the issue at the IMF Executive Board meeting in June.

"If approved... a new allocation of SDRs would add a substantial direct liquidity boost to countries without adding to debt burdens," Rice said. "It would also free up badly needed resources for member countries to help fight the [coronavirus] pandemic, including to support vaccination programs and other urgent measures."

Rice explained that such a move would complement the range of tools deployed by the IMF to support its membership in a time of crisis.

The last time SDR allocation from the IMF was in 2009 during the global financial crisis and helped the global economy recover and boost confidence and growth, Rice said.

"We believe it can do so again," he added.

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US Anti-Gun Groups Demand Biden Produce Plan to Reduce Gun Violence - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - A group of more than 30 gun violence prevention organizations on Thursday sent a letter to President Joe Biden requesting that he and his administration produce an effective "critical reforms" plan to reduce gun violence in the United States.

"President Biden must personally meet with organizations and voices advocating for gun reform, articulate a comprehensive plan and vision for enacting critical reforms and making essential community investments that have been shown to reduce gun violence," the letter said. "We call on President Biden to unveil this proposal during his joint address to Congress."

The organizations said the plan should contain a list of executive actions, a budgetary commitment to invest in the most impacted communities, the appointment of a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATF) director who will hold the gun industry to account and more aggressive strategy to engage Congress on the issue.

The letter pointed out that more than 9,600 people have lost their lives to gun violence in the first months of 2021, with communities of color being impacted the most.

Among the organizations who co-signed the letter are Survivors Empowered, Live Free California, Community Justice Action Fund and others.

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms.

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Canada Supreme Court Rules Trudeau Government's Carbon Tax Constitutional

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The Liberal Party of Canada's carbon tax mandate, introduced during the early stages of Prime Minister Trudeau's term in office, has been a point of contention between the federal government and several provinces, including Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan, all of which were parties to the lawsuit.

"The GGPPA is constitutional. It sets minimum national standards of [industrial greenhouse gas] GHG price stringency to reduce GHG emissions. Parliament has jurisdiction to enact this law as a matter of national concern under the peace, order, and good government ("POGG") clause," the Supreme Court of Canada said.

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US Invests \$10Bln to Expand Access to Vaccines in Vulnerable Communities - White House

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) -The Biden administration has announced a \$10 billion investment to expand access to coronavirus vaccines in the most vulnerable populations in the United States, including communities of color and low-income populations, the White House said in a release on Thursday.

"The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) will invest nearly \$10 billion to expand access to vaccines and better serve communities of color, rural areas, low-income populations and other underserved communities in the COVID-19 response," the release said. "This funding will expand access to vaccines for vulnerable populations and increase vaccine confidence across the country."

HHS will allocate more than \$6 billion to nearly 1,400 Community Health Centers across the United States to expand coronavirus vaccinations, testing and treatment for vulnerable social groups, the release said.

Another \$3 billion will be invested to support local efforts in states, territories and some large cities to increase vaccine uptake and equity, the release also said.

Moreover, HHS will provide \$300 million for community health workers to support coronavirus prevention and control, and \$32 million for training and technical assistance, the release added. The Biden administration also announced a launch of a partnership to vaccinate dialysis patients who have a 50 percent hospitalization rate and 20-30 percent mortality rate from the novel coronavirus diseases (COVID-19), according to the release.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Below 700,000 First Time Since COVID Breakout - Labor Dept Data

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Some 684,000 Americans filed for unemployment benefits last week, the lowest number since the COVID-19 breakout a year ago, suggesting the jobs market may finally be turning the corner with the pandemic, Labor Department data showed Thursday.

"In the week ending March 20, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 684,000, a decrease of 97,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.

Economists polled by US media had forecast as many as 730,000 jobless claims filings for last week.

The weekly reading for annual unemployment fell by 0.2 percent to 2.7 percent, though policymakers tend to look at the monthly unemployment rate as a better gauge of the overall jobs picture.

"This initial job data is the lowest since the pandemic shutdown began," economist Greg Michalowski said in a posting on ForexLive, referring to the 684,000 filings for the week ended March 20. He, however, noted that more work was needed to bring filings to around the 280,000 level seen just before the COVID-19-related jobless spikes.

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 may 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 also pointed to the continued drop in continuing jobless weekly claims as a sign of labor market progress. Continuing weekly claims — reported with a one-week lag — slid to 3.9 million for the week ended March 20, from 4.13 million during the week to March 13.

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 at 6.2 percent versus 2019 level of 3.5 percent, though that could change in March if weekly filings for benefits continue to decline.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said earlier this month the US central bank will likely keep 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, UK Impose New Myanmar Sanctions on 2 Entities - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The United States in a coordinated action with the United Kingdom imposed new sanctions on two conglomerates in Myanmar in response to the February military coup in the country, the Treasury and State Departments said on Thursday. "The United States is designating two entities linked to the coup leaders, Myanma Economic Holdings Public Company Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation Limited (MEC)," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement. "We are taking this step alongside the United Kingdom, which is announcing a similar action on MEHL today."

The Treasury Department said the designated firms control certain sectors of the economy, including trading, natural resources, alcohol, cigarettes and consumer goods.

"These sanctions specifically target the economic resources of Burma's military regime, which is responsible for the overthrow of Burma's democratically elected government and the ongoing repression of the Burmese people," it said. "These sanctions are not directed at the people of Burma."

The Treasury said MEHL is a secretive military conglomerate with business interests in various areas including banking, trade, logistics, construction, mining as well as tourism, agriculture, and food and beverage.

"MEHL's shareholder data show that profits are systematically distributed to Burma's military, including to those responsible for widespread human rights abuses," it said. "MEHL also has 1,793 institutional shareholders, which include regional military commands and subordinate battalions, divisions, platoons, squadrons, and border guard forces. Shares are distributed across the armed forces with no public accountability, creating secret slush funds that the military uses to augment its operational budget."

The second designated entity, MEC, was set up in 1997 with the stated goals of adding to Burma's economy, realizing the military needs, reducing defense spending, as well as ensuring the welfare of military personnel, the Treasury said.

"Today, MEC is a holding company with businesses in the mining, manufacturing, and telecommunications sectors, as well as companies that supply natural resources to the military, and operate factories producing goods for use by the military," the Treasury said.

The Treasury previously sanctioned the head of MEC, Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, on December 10, 2019 over "serious human rights abuses," and again on February 11, 2021 over his role in leading the February 1 coup.

Blinken said the coordinated action sent a message to Myanmar's military leaders that the US and its allies would follow through on its promises to hold those behind the coup to account.

"In close collaboration with the UK, Canada, and other allies and partners, we continue to call on the military to cease all violence against the people of Burma, release all detainees and halt future arrests, lift martial law and the nationwide state of emergency, remove telecommunications restrictions, and restore the democratically elected government," Blinken said.

On February 1, Myanmar's military overthrew the civilian government and declared a year-long state of emergency. The coup triggered mass protests met by the junta's deadly violence, resulting in more than 260 people having been killed since then.

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UN Rights Defender Calls for Emergency Summit to Prevent Escalation of Myanmar Violence

UNITED NATIONS, March 25 (Sputnik) - UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar Thomas Andrews warned on Thursday that the country's military will further increase its violence against peaceful protesters unless the diplomatic community convenes an emergency summit of all stakeholders to support people under siege.

"Without a focused, diplomatic solution, including the hosting of an emergency summit that brings together Myanmar's neighbors and those countries with great influence in the region, I fear the situation of human rights in Myanmar will further deteriorate as the junta increases the rate of murders, enforced disappearances and torture," Andrews said in a statement.

He urged the UN member states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union, the United States and China to hold a conference bringing all actors in Myanmar, including illegally deposed parliamentarians from the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw.

The UN expert pointed out that the imposition of sanctions has left the most profitable business assets of the military intact and needs to be replaced by a robust "diplomatic offensive."

"This combined course of action — domestic peaceful resistance, sustained pressure, and international diplomatic momentum — will have a greater chance for success than taking up arms and will save untold numbers of lives," he said.

Andrews warned, however, that the window of opportunity to show such a response is closing, and the international community has only a short time remaining to act.

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US Q4 GDP Reading Improves But Economic Decline For 2020 Stays at 3.5% - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The third and final GDP reading for the United States improved slightly from 4.1 percent to 4.3 percent, but the shift did not change the overall economic decline of 3.5 percent for 2020, the Commerce Department said on Thursday.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 4.3 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020, according to the 'third' estimate released by the Bureau of Economic Analysis," the department said in a statement.

But real GDP decreased 3.5 percent in 2020, unchanged from the previous reading released on February 25, the statement said. In 2019, the US economy grew by 2.2 percent.

And while the revision to fourth quarter GDP was positive, it was still a sliver of the record expansion of 33.1 percent seen in the third quarter. The third quarter growth was extraordinarily large as the economy rebounded from a spate of lockdowns, social restrictions and job losses in the second quarter associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

The annual decline in GDP came after a year of momentous economic disruptions and job losses in the United States. The US economy lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns and social restrictions forced by the COVID-19. About 10 million of those jobs have not returned, data shows.

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US Imposes New Myanmar Sanctions on 2 Entities - Treasury Department

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed new sanctions on two conglomerates in Myanmar in its latest action in response to the military coup in the country, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

The sanctions target Myanma Economic Holdings Public Company Limited and Myanar Economic Corporation Limited, the Treasury said in a notice on its website.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims at 684,000 Last Week - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Some 684,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, the lowest number since the breakout of the coronavirus pandemic a year ago, suggesting the jobs market may finally be turning the corner, Labor Department data showed on Thursday.

"In the week ending March 20, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 684,000, a decrease of 97,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Biden to Give First Presidential Press Conference After Record-Setting Delay

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday will give his first full press conference since taking office after criticism from his opponents and allies for a unusually protracted delay in exposing himself to reporters' grilling.

Biden is expected to boast his accomplishments - a meaningful progress in the vaccination campaign and a huge economic relief package approved by Congress. He will face questions about ways to address a burgeoning immigration and a spike in gun violence.

American media estimates that Biden, who is on day 65 of his presidency, has gone longer than any US president in the past century before having a formal news conference with his 15 most recent predecessors arranging the event within 33 days of taking office. By this point Donald Trump and George HW Bush had each held five press conferences, Bill Clinton four, George W. Bush three, Barack Obama two and Ronald Reagan one, the AP quoted presidential scholar Martha Kumar.

The 78-year-old incumbent, known for his gaffes and suspected by his foes of age-related frailty, has so far shied away from reporters taking occasionally a question or two of his choosing during the White House events.

Biden, however, has already delivered his first prime-time address to the nation and gave an interview to ABC News, during which notoriously admitted that he considers Vladimir Putin "a killer." The Russian leader immediately offered to discuss relations in public debates, but his proposal was rejected by the White House.

The press conference is being convened after Biden has administered the first 100 million COVID-19 vaccines and presumably put the country on track to have enough shots for every adult American by the end of May. The President pushed his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief initiative, dubbed America Rescue Plan, through Congress and signed it into law. Biden is determined to introduce stricter gun controls after two mass shooting within as many weeks killed 18 Americans, a move bound to infuriate his Republican opponents.

Another issue, which is sure to be raised during the press conference, is a rapid increase of migrants seeking access to the United States. Biden's foes blame him for what they describe as the southern border crisis

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RPT - First Ever Reparations for Black Americans Likely to Spread Nationwide - City Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - Paying Black Americans for past discrimination will eventually become a nationwide practice with support from Washington, Evanston Alderman Robin Rue Simmons, who spearheaded historic reparations legislation this week, told Sputnik.

On Monday, the Chicago suburb of Evanston became the first US city to offer reparations payments to Black residents. By an 8-1 vote, city officials agreed to pay \$25,000 to individuals and \$50,000 to households who suffered from housing discrimination. The council set aside \$400,000 to disburse to Black homeowners who qualify.

"Reparations is going to happen. Yes, in our lifetime, with hard work, a commitment from the president, the commitment in cities nationwide, with support of our allies," Rue Simmons said. "Legislative moves are possible in Congress. These are viable actions for repair and redress. Anything less is insufficient policy."

The city councilwoman said US Representative Shelia Jackson-Lee and Senator Cory Booker are pushing similar legislation in Congress. Rue Simmons also said she is not running for reelection so can work exclusively on promoting reparative justice.

Catholic churches and a major American bank - along with mayors and other leadership - are supporting the movement, she added.

Rue Simmons, who has represented Evanston's 5th Ward since 2017, said she was struck by the stark disparities between the way Blacks in Evanston live when compared to their white counterparts. So she set about looking for viable solutions.

In response to Evanston's long history of discriminatory housing practices, Rue Simmons said the city council made a collective decision to focus on redressing disparities.

Despite opposition from different corners of US society and a reluctance to discuss or acknowledge the effects of racism, discrimination and slavery, Rue Simmons said she remains confident that reparations will eventually be embraced across the US.