

03/26/21 Friday

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Beijing Pushes for 10 Million COVID-19 Shots Per Day to Hit 40% Vaccination by June
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Because the Chinese government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak has been so effective, it has paradoxically led to lower public concern about getting vaccinated against the virus. Now, officials are rushing to stir awareness in order to protect the population and reopen travel. With vaccination numbers slackening, the Chinese government has begun a new push to encourage people to get vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. They have set a goal of 40% of the country's 1.4 billion people being vaccinated by June. According to the [South China Morning Post](#), roughly 5.5 million people were vaccinated against COVID-19 on Thursday, a significant increase from the 1.6 million average on Saturday. However, in order to reach the goal of 560 million people vaccinated by June 1, that number will have to double to 10 million per day.

Vice-Premier Sun Chunlan set the goal during a Monday teleconference on vaccination held by the State Council inter-agency task force for COVID-19 response, [Xinhua News reported](#). China has [five COVID-19 vaccines](#) in various stages of use: one from CanSino Biologics Inc; one from Wuhan Institute of Biological Products, an affiliate of the China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm); another from Sinopharm called BBIBP-CorV; and one from Sinovac. [A fifth vaccine](#), developed jointly by Anhui Zhifei Longcom Biopharmaceutical Co. Ltd. and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, was approved for emergency production last week. It requires three doses but can be stored at typical refrigerator temperatures, unlike some of the earlier vaccines that require deep freezing to remain usable.

So far, an estimated 91.3 million doses have been administered, according to the National Health Commission (NHC). However, [China has exported](#) almost as many vaccine doses as it has kept for its own use, in stark contrast to the United States and United Kingdom, which have [kept essentially all](#) of the vaccines their respective countries have produced so far, although the Biden administration has pledged \$4 billion toward the World Health Organization's [COVAX program](#).

Price of Success

Ironically, China's incredible success at controlling the COVID-19 outbreak has left many people feeling like there is no great rush to get protected from the virus.

"Many people mistakenly think there is no practical meaning to be vaccinated because the epidemic situation is under effective control and the virus is far away from us," NHC statistics and informatics chief He Qinghua said at a news conference last week, according to the [Associated Press](#).

China has suffered barely 90,000 cases of COVID-19 and just 4,636 deaths, virtually all of which occurred during the initial outbreak in late 2019 and early 2020, which preceded the virus' global sweep. By comparison, the United States has seen more than 30 million cases of the

virus and suffered an appalling 547,000 deaths, according to Friday data collected by [The New York Times](#). China detected its first COVID-19 case in a month last Thursday.

“Now that we have vaccines, we must let more people get immunity and protection through inoculation,” He said. “I once again suggest that people get vaccinated as soon as possible so as to acquire immunity.”

Shanghai vaccine expert Tao Lina told SCMP that Sun’s goal was entirely achievable - in fact, the country has done it before.

“I believe the target of reaching 10 million a day is not hard to reach if supplies keep up – there will be days higher than the 10 million. We achieved that years ago,” Sun said, referring to [a 2010 initiative](#) in which 100 million children were vaccinated against measles in just 10 days.

“We just need to be patient and wait for the daily administered doses to trend upwards,” she added.

SCMP noted that public servants, university students, teachers and doctors are all being urged to get vaccinated. The vaccines are administered voluntarily and under informed consent, but some are reportedly saying they faced public humiliation if they don’t get their shots.

[The Global Times](#) noted that some communities are also staging door-to-door campaigns to raise awareness about getting the vaccine, and are holding public “sharing sessions” where people discuss getting the vaccine in an effort to boost public willingness to get them.

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Video: SpaceX Rocket Debris Breaks Up in Fiery Cascade Over US Pacific Northwest
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Earlier this week, the ELSA-d mission launched from Russia’s Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan to perform new experiments on capturing space junk. More than 8,000 tons of man-made debris orbits the Earth, imperiling spacecraft and satellites.

Folks in the American Pacific Northwest were treated to an unusual display in the night sky on Thursday night, after a large piece of space debris broke up during reentry, streaking across the sky in a cascade of fire.

It looked like a scene from “War of the Worlds”: a stream of bright fireballs streaked across the sky, lighting up brighter than the glow of city lights. According to reports, the shockwave at its final breakup could be heard and felt indoors.

Numerous videos of the incident soon appeared online and quickly became viral.

— vampire enthusiast (@vampyreparty) [March 26, 2021](#)

One longer video shows the debris did not dissipate quickly, continuing to burn for more than a minute.

Many suspected it was a type of bolide similar to that which streaked [across Russia and exploded](#) over the city of Chelyabinsk in February 2013, shattering windows for miles. However, the US [National Weather Service identified](#) a different culprit.

“The widely reported bright objects in the sky were the debris from a Falcon 9 rocket 2nd stage that did not successfully have a deorbit burn,” NWS said in what it noted was an unofficial

conclusion that was pending confirmation. “Based on the observed video, this looks more likely than a bolide meteor or similar object as they would be moving far faster on impact with our atmosphere. There are NO expected impacts on the ground in our region at this time.”

Soon enough, astronomer Jonathan McDowell, a researcher at the Harvard–Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, provided folks with a more scientific explanation: the fiery show was the breaking up of the second stage of a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket that launched on March 4. He shared a map of its flight path, which passed over Oregon and Washington on the night of March 25 (March 26 in coordinated universal time).

McDowell noted the rocket stage was about 3 tons in mass and about 7 meters long. The original intent was to deorbit it shortly after launch over a remote part of the south Pacific. When the engine didn’t fire like it should have, the rocket piece was set on a steadily declining orbit that made its eventual crash back to Earth unpredictable.

This isn’t the first time a discarded rocket stage caused a stir down on Earth. In December, a [mysterious asteroid expected](#) to make a close pass to Earth was revealed to be the long-lost second stage of a centaur rocket launched way back in 1966 that malfunctioned, sending the moon probe it was carrying crashing down onto the lunar surface and the rocket stage spiraling off into the void.

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LAPD Deny Responsibility for Helicopter Pilots Heard Joking About Dumping Lit Fuel on Protesters

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) huge fleet of 17 helicopters plays such a prominent role in its patrolling of poor Black and brown communities, the choppers have been nicknamed “ghetto birds” by locals who always see one when they look up.

Amid a tense protest at a Los Angeles, California park on Wednesday night, a group of helicopter pilots joked over the radio about dumping their fuel on the crowd and setting it alight. Now, the state’s inspector general is set to investigate whether the comments were made by LAPD officers.

On March 24, hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside Echo Park Lake to protest the planned removal of more than 100 homeless people from a longstanding encampment in the park. That night, [an estimated 400 LAPD](#) officers in riot gear surrounded the protesters in a “kettle,” [firing non-lethal rounds](#) into the crowd and arresting more than a dozen people, with people noting they seemed to be specifically [targeting legal observers](#) and journalists. After dispersing the crowd, the officers set about evicting the park’s tenants.

Meanwhile, protesters counted at least six LAPD helicopters circling overhead throughout the night. One person listening in on the radio channel noticed at about 11:20 pm that night a worrisome exchange:

“Great when they put the fuel dumps on these helicopters,” one pilot can be heard saying.

“I would have dumped it on Glendale Boulevard a long time ago,” a second pilot said, referring to one of the roads that borders the park.

“I’ll bring the match,” the first replies to chuckling.

At first, the observer, whose name on Twitter is given only as “joe,” believed the chatter must have come from LAPD pilots. However, they later [noted in replies](#) to the original tweet that “it has been brought to my attention that this audio may have come from a news chopper instead of LAPD. Apologies as I genuinely believed this was recorded from LAPD when first posting this. I have been trying to verify the exact source of the audio since this concern was raised to me but have not been able to so far.”

Twitterers brought the clip to the attention of the California Inspector General’s Office, which responded on Thursday it had “received and forwarded” the recording to its Complaint Section. TMZ also put the question to the department directly, [reporting on Friday](#) that LAPD claimed it had investigated and “definitively determined” the chatter wasn’t from LAPD employees. The LAPD’s helicopters, the [largest chopper fleet](#) of any police department in the world, are reportedly a notorious menace for city residents. The [outlet Knock LA](#), which reports on the activities of the city’s police, noted recently that residents in predominantly black areas of the city have seen a pronounced uptick in helicopter overflights above their already-higher-than-normal frequency, which the department associates with increased effectiveness at preventing crime [and increasing arrests](#).

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Jacob Blake Sues Kenosha Police Officer Rusten Sheskey Over August Shooting That Prompted Protests
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The militant protests that rocked Kenosha, Wisconsin, last year followed yet another incident of police officers using potentially deadly force against an unarmed black man. While 29-year-old Jacob Blake survived the encounter albeit paralyzed from his wounds, so far the officers involved have faced no consequences.

Blake, whose shooting by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin last year set off major protests against police brutality, has brought a lawsuit against the officer who pulled the trigger and left him paralyzed after the district attorney declined to bring charges against him.

The lawsuit, filed Friday in the US District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin, alleges that Kenosha Police Officer Rusten Sheskey utilized “excessive force” that was “undertaken with malice, willfulness, and reckless indifference” when responding to a police call on August 23, 2020. Blake was shot six times by Sheskey during the incident, with the officer’s hollow-tipped 9-millimeter bullets ripping through his arms, chest, and spinal column.

“As a direct and proximate result of the Defendant’s misconduct as fully detailed herein, plaintiff suffered grave physical and psychological injuries that included physical harm from six gunshot wounds, permanent paralysis, disfigurement and disability, as well as great mental anguish, humiliation, degradation, loss of reputation and anxiety,” [the lawsuit notes](#).

The suit outlines the interaction in step-by-step detail, which occurred while Blake was putting one of his sons into the backseat of his SUV. Police were called for “family trouble” for an incident that didn’t involve him, but upon arrival immediately attacked Blake, who in trying to get back into his car was grabbed by Sheskey, who then fired his pistol seven times into Blake’s back while pulling on Blake’s shirt.

The suit notes that four women and a toddler were in the immediate vicinity when the shots were fired, and that one bullet ricocheted off Blake’s car and hit the road surface. The entire incident was captured on a cell phone camera.

In January, Wisconsin District Attorney [Michael Graveley declined](#) to press charges against Sheskey for the shooting, claiming that because Blake had a knife, the officer could rightfully claim self-defense. However, as the Friday filing notes, the knife in question was a folding pocket knife that fell out of Blake’s pocket [during the scramble](#) with the officers and which he never brandished at them, but did pick up and put back in his pocket.

As a consequence of the DA’s decision, Blake’s federal suit instead seeks a “fair and just amount sufficient to compensate plaintiff for the injuries he has suffered, plus a substantial sum in punitive damages, as well as costs, attorney’s fees, and such other relief as is just and equitable.”

News of the shooting, which came after months of mass nationwide protests against police brutality and anti-black racism swept the United States, touched off new protests in Kenosha as well. More than 1,000 [National Guard soldiers](#) and federal police were dispatched to put down the protests after Kyle Rittenhouse, a 17-year-old boy from Illinois, [shot three people](#) in the Kenosha protests, two of whom died of their wounds.

Blake, who was hospitalized from his encounter with Sheskey but survived, was [shackled to his hospital bed](#) for six days. He was discharged in early October [to begin rehab](#).

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Several Reported to be Wounded as Car Hits Pedestrians in Brooklyn
by [Mary E.](#)

At least six people were injured on Friday after a car plowed into several pedestrians following a multiple-vehicle car crash in Brooklyn, New York. Captured footage shows first responders treating patients at the scene of the incident.

The crash, which seemed to involve three cars, occurred in a Brooklyn neighborhood just before 1 p.m. local time. The accident is believed to have taken place after a car jumped a curb.

At least six injuries have been reported. It is unclear how many of those injured were pedestrians or drivers.

None of the injuries are believed to be life-threatening, although three are believed to be serious, [ABC 7 reported](#).

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White House: Biden Invites Putin, Xi Among 40 Leaders to April Global Climate Summit
by [Daria Bedenko](#), [Mary F.](#)

US President Joe Biden has said he wants to ensure that the United States attains a 100% clean energy economy and reaches net-zero emissions before 2050. Biden has already taken several steps to combat climate change by rejoining the Paris agreement and revoking the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline.

The White House released a statement on Friday, revealing that 40 world leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping, are invited to the Leaders Summit on Climate set to be held on 22-23 April.

"The Leaders Summit on Climate will underscore the urgency – and the economic benefits – of stronger climate action", the statement said. "In his invitation, the President urged leaders to use the Summit as an opportunity to outline how their countries also will contribute to stronger climate ambition."

Key themes of the upcoming summit will be efforts by the world's economies to reduce carbon emissions, mobilizing public and private sector finance to drive the net-zero transition, the economic benefits of climate action, developing technologies that will help adapt to climate change and other issues.

Speaking to reporters on Friday, US President Joe Biden confirmed that both Russian and Chinese leaders are invited to an upcoming summit.

"They know they're invited. But I haven't spoken to either one of them yet," Biden said when asked if he had invited Xi and Putin to next month's event.

Earlier in the day, The Associated Press reported, citing administration officials, that Biden will be inviting Vladimir Putin of Russia and Xi Jinping of China to the first major climate talks of his administration: the Climate Leaders' Summit.

The US-convened forum, to be held on April 22 and April 23, will include other major economies and will involve discussions on global efforts to curb fossil fuel pollution. The summit will most likely be remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's a list of the key players and it's about having some of the tough conversations and the important conversations," an unidentified administration official [told the outlet](#), speaking of the event. "Given how important ... this issue is to the entire world, we have to be willing to talk about it and we have to be willing to talk about it at the high levels."

In January, Biden signed an executive order to have the US rejoin the Paris climate agreement, after former US president Donald Trump withdrew the US from the agreement in 2017.

The Paris Agreement is an international deal that was created within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2015. Countries that are part of the deal set limits on their greenhouse gas emissions, the primary cause of man-made climate change.

Other executive orders signed by the current US administration include conserving at least 30% of federal lands and oceans by 2030 and eliminating new oil and gas leases on public lands and waters.

The administration has also promised to cut carbon emissions from the electricity industry by 2035 and restore scientific integrity in the federal government.

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US State Department Condemns Chinese Boycotts of Companies Avoiding Xinjiang Cotton by [Mary F.](#)

Fashion giant H&M, Nike and other brands have been under attack from Chinese state media outlets urging consumers to boycott the brand in response to growing sanctions from Western countries, including the US, on Xinjiang, where almost 90% of China's cotton is manufactured. The US President Joe Biden administration on Friday condemned Chinese boycotts against international businesses avoiding using cotton produced in the Xinjiang region.

The US and other countries have condemned Beijing for alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang against the Uyghur Muslims and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups. The purported abuses range from forced labor to mass detention in internment camps, forced sterilizations and restrictions on religious freedoms.

"The United States condemns the PRC's People's Republic of China's] state-led social-media campaign and corporate and consumer boycott against companies, including American, European and Japanese businesses [for their decisions not to use cotton from China's Xinjiang region," State Department spokesperson Jalina Porter said Friday, [The Wall Street Journal reported.](#)

"We commend and stand with companies that adhere to the US law and ensure products we are consuming are not made with forced labor," she added.

The latest comments come after Chinese state broadcaster CGTN on Wednesday night called on consumers to boycott H&M for refusing to source cotton from Xinjiang.

Other major state-media outlets also picked up and began disseminating the news. In a Thursday social media post, Chinese state-controlled People's Daily lashed out against Nike, New Balance, Adidas and Burberry on [Weibo](#), China's equivalent of Twitter. In addition, the H&M store this week was blocked on the Chinese online shopping website Taobao, with H&M's app no longer showing up in Chinese Android app stores or on Baidu or Goode online maps, [The Washington Post reported.](#)

Nike has also been under attack by China, with Yuehua Entertainment, a privately held Chinese multinational entertainment group, announcing on Thursday it had ended its endorsement contract with the brand.

"The country's dignity cannot be violated," said the statement from Yuehua Entertainment, the Post reported. "We resolutely safeguard the interests of the motherland."

On Monday, the United States, the European Union, Britain and Canada announced sanctions on several Chinese officials over Xinjiang.

China has pushed back against allegations that its Muslim minority is mistreated and has accused other countries of using human rights allegations to interfere in the country's domestic issues.

“There has never has been so-called genocide, forced labor or religious oppression in Xinjiang,” Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the United Nations Human Rights Council last month, [Bloomberg reported](#). Such inflammatory accusations are fabricated out of ignorance and prejudice.”

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Biden Decries Georgia’s ‘Un-American’ Voting Law, Calls it ‘Blatant Attack’ on the Constitution by [Mary F.](#)

A new sweeping Georgia voting law signed by Governor Brian Kemp on Thursday limits the use of ballot drop boxes, requires state voters to produce photo IDs for absentee ballots, cuts short the deadline for request absentee ballots and makes it illegal for people to provide food or water to voters while they wait in lines to cast their ballots.

US President Joe Biden on Friday [slammed](#) the new voting law in Georgia, calling it “un-American” and a “blatant attack on the constitution and good conscience.” In addition, the president likened the law to “Jim Crow in the 21st century,” referring to laws enacted by white Southern state legislatures to enforce racial segregation and disenfranchise black people. The [voting legislation](#), signed into law by Georgia Governor Brian Kemp on Thursday, makes several big changes to Georgia’s elections, including giving the State Elections Board more control over local election offices. The law would allow the board to temporarily suspend county-level election directors and election boards, which Democrats have expressed concern with.

In addition, the bill requires voters to present a government-issued ID to apply for an absentee ballot and include an identifying number from a government-issued ID on the ballot envelope. This provision is a diversion from the current system, which uses signature verification to authenticate absentee ballot applications and ballots.

On Friday, Kemp retorted to Biden’s comments on the law, noting “it is obvious that neither” the president “nor his handlers have actually read” the bill.

“There is nothing ‘Jim Crow’ about requiring a photo or state-issued ID to vote by absentee ballot – every Georgia voter must already do so when voting in-person,” [he argued](#)

Meanwhile, former US president Donald Trump, who lost Georgia in the 2020 presidential elections, celebrated the new law.

“Congratulations to Georgia and the Georgia State Legislature on changing their voter Rules and Regulations,” Trump [said](#) through his political action committee Save America. “They learned from the travesty of the 2020 Presidential Election, which can never be allowed to happen again. Too bad these changes could not have been done sooner!”

The latest law comes after Georgia went blue for the first time in nearly three decades during the 2020 presidential election, and also after Democrats won both of Georgia’s Senate seats for the first time in almost 20 years in January.

While Kemp has argued that the law will help to ensure that elections are fair and secure, many Democrats and civil rights groups have argued that the Republican-backed law would make it harder for people, particularly black voters, to cast ballots.

On Friday, several civil law groups, including New Georgia Project, Black Voters Matter Fund and Rise, filed a [lawsuit](#) against Georgia election officials, stating that the voting restrictions signed into law by Kemp, violate the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the 14th Amendment. "These provisions lack any justification for their burdensome and discriminatory effects on voting," the lawsuit notes, referring to the fact that such laws would allegedly [disproportionately impact](#) communities of color. "Instead, they represent a hodgepodge of unnecessary restrictions that target almost every aspect of the voting process but serve no legitimate purpose or compelling state interest other than to make absentee, early, and election-day voting more difficult — especially for minority voters".

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Authorities Confirm Colorado Shooting Suspect Passed Background Check Before Purchasing Firearm

by [Evan Craighead](#)

The 21-year-old suspect accused of killing 10 people in a Boulder, Colorado, grocery store appeared in court on Thursday. The brief hearing concluded with the judge granting defense attorney Kathryn Herold's request for a mental health evaluation of her client, who remains jailed, without bail.

John Mark Eagleton, owner of Eagles Nest Armory in Arvada, Colorado, issued a statement to local news outlet [9News](#) on Friday to declare that Boulder shooting suspect, Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa, did pass a background check prior to purchasing a firearm from his gun shop on March 16 - just six days before the deadly incident.

"We are absolutely shocked by what happened and our hearts are broken for the victims and families that are left behind. Ensuring every sale that occurs at our shop is lawful, has always been and will always remain the highest priority for our business," Eagleton wrote.

The Boulder Police Department has confirmed that a total of 10 individuals, including the first officer to respond to the call at King Soopers, were killed on March 22.

"Regarding the firearm in question, a background check of the purchaser was conducted as required by Colorado law and approval for the sale was provided by the Colorado Bureau of Investigation," he added.

Eagleton also expressed that his business has, and will continue to "fully cooperate with law enforcement."

Boulder Police Chief Maris Herold held a live press conference on Friday, detailing that 167 individuals from at least 26 local, state and federal agencies have been mobilized in recent days to investigate the incident.

"Like the rest of the community, we too want to know why -- why that King Soopers, why Boulder, why Monday," she remarked. "Unfortunately, at this time, we still don't have those answers."

The police chief further confirmed the [Ruger AR-556](#) - an AR-15 style, semi-automatic pistol - found at the scene was legally purchased by the gunman. Another firearm was recovered, but authorities do not believe it was used in the shooting.

Authorities remain unaware of how many shots were exchanged between police and the suspect.

"Their actions saved other civilians from being killed," Boulder County District Attorney Michael Dougherty said during the Friday news conference, speaking of the responding officers.

"They charged into the store and immediately faced a very significant amount of gunfire from the shooter, who at first they were unable to locate."

The 21-year-old suspect has been charged with 10 counts of first-degree murder. If convicted, he faces life imprisonment, without the option of parole.

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Ex-Aide Who Accused Cuomo of Sexual Harassment Compares NY Governor to Jabba the Hutt by [Evan Craighead](#)

Lindsey Boylan, a former aide for Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, was the first woman to accuse the 63-year-old of sexual misconduct. Back in December, the 36-year-old alleged Cuomo "sexually harassed me for years" and kissed her "on the lips" after a meeting. The governor has denied all allegations of sexual misconduct.

As New York State Attorney General Letitia James probes allegations leveled against Cuomo, Boylan took to social media and attempted to draw comparisons between her former boss and Star Wars' resident crime-boss space-slug, Jabba the Hutt.

"Just the good old office welcome to women in the governor's office of New York," she tweeted Thursday evening, along with a picture of Jabba attempting to lick Princess Leia as she struggles to escape his grip.

Boylan, a Democrat running for president of New York City's Manhattan Borough, previously compared the NY governor to the Tatooine gangster in a March 9 tweet.

Some netizens viewed the image as uncouth, considering the seriousness of the allegations leveled against Cuomo.

However, others went along with the joke, and some expressed support for Boylan.

The state's attorney general announced earlier this month that Joon Kim, former US attorney for the Southern District of New York, and employment discrimination lawyer Anne Clark would be leading the probe into sexual misconduct allegations leveled against Cuomo.

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Biden: Administration Exploring Possible Legislation on Imported, 3D-Printed Firearms by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Tuesday, New York Attorney General Letitia James called on members of Congress, as well as US President Joe Biden, to continue their push for gun reform legislation, including the banning of "ghost guns" - a term typically used to describe homemade or improvised firearms. Speaking to reporters in Delaware on Friday, Biden detailed that his administration is exploring legislation - or even executive action - related to firearm imports to the US.

"We're looking at what kind of authority I have relative to imported weapons - as well as whether or not I have the authority," the US president said, as reported [by Reuters](#).

He also expressed intent to explore possible restrictions related to ghost guns and other "new weapons that are being made by 3D equipment that aren't registered as guns at all."

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki also explained to reporters that the tentative gun law proposals will "have to go through a review process."

"And so we have to address this epidemic, address the threat of gun violence across many avenues. And he will — he's committed to doing that," Psaki added during the Friday [news briefing](#).

Conversations about US [gun laws](#) have intensified following the Monday mass shooting in Boulder, Colorado, as well as the March 16 mass shootings in Atlanta, Georgia. A total of 18 individuals were killed in the incidents.

The gunmen, both 21-year-old men, have both been charged for their respective crimes.

Since the events, Biden and many Democratic lawmakers in Washington have called on the Senate to approve the chamber's version of [H.R.8](#) and [H.R.1446](#) - a pair of gun reform bills that seek to expand background check requirements for prospective gun owners.

Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA), like many other Republican senators, oppose the increased legislative focus on gun possession in the US.

"What we have got to concentrate on is how to control that risk. You're not going to stop the killings until you stop the killers. But you don't stop drunk drivers by getting rid of all sober drivers," he said [this week](#), arguing that some Democrats want to defy the Second Amendment. Kennedy went on to say the US needs more "idiot control," rather than gun control because the US already has certain restrictions and background checks in place.

"If you're convicted of certain crimes, if you have a tendency to violence, if you're mentally ill and you want to buy a gun, your name has to run through a database," he added.

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Nikki Haley: Biden's 'Weak Leadership' on China Will Have 'Disastrous Effect' on US
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Under the Trump administration, Nikki Haley served as US ambassador to the United Nations, a post many believed she would use to promote human rights abroad. Haley, however, quickly did the complete opposite, especially once the US withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council after repeatedly defending lethal force used by Israel during protests.

Reflecting on recent remarks made by US President Joe Biden at his first major news conference, Haley has blasted the commander-in-chief for what she believed to be a soft stance on China, labeling his comments as “weak leadership.”

Airing out her frustrations via social media, the former US ambassador took to Twitter on Thursday, where she faulted Biden for not taking a harder approach on China in light of alleged human rights abuses being committed against the Asian country’s Uyghur population, a minority ethnic group native to China’s northwest Xinjiang region.

“Biden doesn’t think it’s necessary to criticize China - a country actively committing genocide - for wanting to become the most powerful country in the world,” Haley remarked in a [tweet](#) accompanying a clip with Biden’s comments. “His weak leadership is going to have disastrous effects on America’s future.”

Biden’s highly anticipated [news conference](#) touched on a variety of topics, such as the migrant crisis at the US’ southern border, the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea’s recent missiles test, and, of course, relations with China.

However, when it came to discussing China, Biden did not exactly tiptoe around the topic as Haley suggests. While Biden admitted that his administration was not interested in engaging in a “confrontation” with China, the president did state he had no intention of letting it become a leading country in the world.

In the video clip shared by Haley, Biden is heard stating that “China has an overall goal and I don’t criticize them for the goal,” and cuts off just as the president acknowledges how the booming nation seeks to become a global leader.

But those weren’t the last remarks uttered by Biden on the subject. He went on to say that China becoming “the most powerful country in the world” would not happen on his watch “because the United States is going to continue to grow and expand.”

The video Haley shared with her nearly 700,000 followers also failed to include Biden’s multi-step effort to push back against China, a three-pronged initiative which involves reinvesting in American workers, mending alliances with partners, and condemning China’s alleged human rights violations.

Haley’s condemnation of Biden was followed up on Friday with another tweet against the Biden administration, but this time with a focus on Vice President Kamala Harris. Haley’s [commentary](#) criticized Biden’s decision to select Harris as the [point person](#) for the White House’s efforts to tackle the intensifying border crisis.

Over the last few months, Haley has remained vocal about various topics, including actions taken by her previous boss, former US President Donald Trump.

Although the former official [has indicated](#) she will willingly “defend the bulk of the Trump record,” she temporarily flipped the script in the wake of the Capitol riot, [telling Politico](#) that she was “disgusted” by Trump’s behavior. However, Haley later opted to sing [Trump’s praises](#) after he made his first public appearance at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference in February.

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Briefing Room Showdown: Fox News Reporter Spars With Psaki Over Network's Access to Biden

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, US President Joe Biden held his very first major news conference to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant crisis, and much-needed comprehensive gun control measures, among other hot-button issues. However, the event saw Biden call on every media network except Fox News.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki took Fox News reporter Peter Doocy to task on Friday after the correspondent confronted her over Biden's failure to pick on him during the question period of [the event](#).

The tense exchange initially began with Doocy noting that Biden often has with him a list of journalists to call on from the pool, and that Fox News is the "only member of the five network TV pool that has never been on the list in front of the president."

Aside from Fox News, the network pool Doocy refers to includes ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN. "I'm just curious, is that official administration policy?" the White House correspondent asked after he failed to ask Biden anything from his "[binder full of questions](#)."

And with that, the gloves went out the window and the setting was set for several seconds' worth of cringey, eyebrow-raising, back-and-forth remarks between the pair.

"We're here having a conversation, aren't we?" Psaki remarked in turn, as Doocy attempted to respond. "And do I take questions from you every time I come to the briefing room? Has the president taken questions from you since he came into office, yes or no?"

After being overtalked, Doocy eventually managed to get more than two words in, explaining that he has "only" been able to get a response from Biden when he has "shouted" out a question once the president goes down his list of reporters.

"The president has been very generous with his time with Fox. I'm just curious about this list that he's given. [Fox News is] the only member of the five network pool never on it dating back to when he resumed in-person events in Wilmington during the campaign," Doocy added.

Sidestepping Doocy's actual question about the list of reporters, Psaki ultimately called the exchange to an end after citing their "limited time" in the briefing room. The press secretary did, however, indicate that she is "always happy to have this conversation," and that Biden "has taken" questions from the reporter in the past.

Doocy was not the only individual not called on during the event, as reporters from The New York Times [also failed](#) to get a question answered by Biden.

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North Korea Says US May Face 'Something Not Good' If Biden Echoes 'Thoughtless Remarks' From Presser

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, US President Joe Biden remarked at his first major news conference that North Korea was a top foreign policy crisis for his administration, and that Washington would “respond accordingly” if Pyongyang continued to carry out missile tests. The tests came as a response to renewed regional military drills between the US and South Korea.

North Korea has condemned Biden’s recent remarks regarding missile tests conducted by Pyongyang, warning the US that it may face “something that is not good” if the president continues to make similar “thoughtless remarks.”

The [Saturday statement](#) from Ri Pyong Chol, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, notes that Biden is shedding light on his “deep-seated hostility” toward North Korea.

“The recent testfire of new-type tactical guided missiles was an act tantamount to the exercise of the full-fledged right of a sovereign state for self-defense, as it was a process that had been undertaken to implement the goals of the policy on national defense science set forth by our party and government to boost the defense capabilities of the country,” Ri explains.

“Such remarks from the US president are an undisguised encroachment on our state’s right to self-defense and provocation to it.”

North Korea has long maintained that continued military drills in the region are a threat to its state as the exercises with regional partners serve as a rehearsal for a potential invasion against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Ri went on to state that Biden expressed a “gangster-like logic” by expecting North Korea to not ensure its own security, as Washington gave the go-ahead to resume joint military exercises in the region.

“We are by no means developing weapons to draw someone’s attention or influence his policy. If the war exercise staged by the US right before its belligerent party across the ocean is for ‘defense,’ we are supposed to have the full-fledged right to self-defense to contain the former’s military threat on its mainland,” Ri continued.

“The new US administration obviously took its first step wrong. If the US continues with its thoughtless remarks without thinking of the consequences, it may be faced with something that is not good.”

“We know very well what we must do. We will continue to increase our most thoroughgoing and overwhelming military power,” he concluded.

North Korea’s recent batch of missile tests were the very first such tests to be carried out under the Biden administration. The country had last launched a pair of short-range [ballistic missiles](#) in March 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the Thursday [news conference](#), Biden blasted the tests and promised that his administration would “respond accordingly” if Pyongyang chooses to carry out any additional tests. However, Biden did also state he would be willing to establish a diplomatic resolution with North Korean leaders, so long as denuclearization is on the table.

Neither the White House nor the US State Department have responded to Ri’s statements.

Ties between the US and the DPRK have remained tense for decades and remained as such under the Trump administration, despite former US President Donald Trump and North Korea leader Kim Jong Un holding meetings on two occasions.

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RPT: FEATURE - 'Hard to See Them Drown': Texas Fisherman Sees Migrants Die as Border Police Stay Idle

EL PASO, March 26 (Sputnik) - A local fisherman in the southern Texas border town of Laredo — which sits nestled along the Rio Grande river that splits the US-Mexico frontier across the state — has a difficult time sleeping at night after he witnessed a group of migrants consumed by water after a grim struggle to cross turbulent border river as the police simply let them drown. Jesus Vargas, 50, shared with Sputnik video and photos documenting the incident that occurred on the afternoon of March 16, not far from a spot where he fishes.

The materials appear to show Vargas frustrated that several US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents on the scene watched the migrants drown and failed to make a rescue attempt. Some photos show a graphic image of the body of a deceased migrant floating in the river.

Sputnik was not able to interdependently verify the authenticity of the footage. The incident, however, comes as the US is on the path to face the greatest influx of undocumented migrants at the border with Mexico in the past 20 years.

"It's hard to see them drown. I have never seen anybody die and nobody did shit," Vargas said. "That's why I was pissed off because nobody had a life jacket for me or something. If they didn't want to go in the river, I would go."

'NO ONE HAD ANYTHING' FOR RESCUE

Vargas usually fishes Alligator gar that weigh more than 100 pounds and March 16 was no different: he was on his way to his usual fishing spot on the river when he witnessed the CBP responding to a smuggling attempt in his area. He said he grabbed his fishing rod and cast the fishing line to a migrant child who was drowning and pulled him to shore.

"How can a firefighter, police officer, or whoever, be saving animals but they don't want to save a human?" Vargas said. "No firefighters arrived, no ambulances arrived, nothing arrived. Not even the [border patrol] boat. I fish everyday and one of their boats - if you call saying there's a shooting, they're there in seconds."

Another thing that frustrated the Laredo resident is that the border agents who were at the scene lacked even the most primitive rescue devices at hand.

"My frustration was that no one had anything. Long before, [border patrol] had a throw rope, some footballs, they always had something with them, even life jackets," Vargas said. "A friend, I won't tell you who, told me that when [then-President Donald] Trump came in he got rid of all that."

"I stayed traumatized with that video, I'm not lying, I still can't sleep," Vargas confessed. "I lay down and close my eyes, it's ugly to see that."

TROUBLED BORDER

The US Border Patrol Laredo Sector shared its own account of the March 16 events on the same day, saying that its agents had foiled a human smuggling attempt at the end of a road near the Rio Grande riverbanks.

"Agents witnessed several individuals exit a vehicle and attempt to swim across the Rio Grande river into Mexico," the statement said. "Several individuals were apprehended in the vehicle at encounter. Some individuals entered the river and safely made it to the Mexican riverbanks. One individual was rescued by a local fisherman and rendered first aid by agents. Two individuals succumbed to the dangerous currents of the Rio Grande river and perished."

The lifelong resident of Laredo said he has been fishing the Rio Grande river for about 48 years and has experienced the dangerous current that tumbles below the surface of the water.

"Below it's ugly, there's a current. Although on top you don't see anything, you can feel the current is moving you below," Vargas said.

The river has been the scene of many tragic events throughout Vargas' life, from illegal immigration to drug trafficking, he said.

"If they [migrants] find work, good, but if not - well there's no work. I know how it is in Mexico. Mexico has murderers, everything," Vargas said. "I've lived here nearby where they kill people right there on the edge of the river [Mexico side], they shoot them, cut their hands. I've seen it all here on the river my whole live. I'm not lying."

When asked how many undocumented migrants pass by his house on a daily basis, he said, "A bunch of them, man. I live about a block, block-and-a-half, and the river is right there."

Vargas said he's also witnessed about 17 migrants in an underground tunnel used for smuggling and also saw a car full of migrants fall in the river, killing everyone.

"I've found them drowned, tied, handcuffed. I've taken bodies out with their boots, belt, shirt, holes in their chest," Vargas said. "They've fallen off the train [near the river], their kids fall off...or they die."

BIDEN POLICY

Vargas suggested that President Joe Biden could allow migrants to come into the US through the ports of entry as a way to prevent tragic events, like the drowning, from happening, and to end human smuggling.

"Right now they're saying that a lot of migrants are coming to the United States, that's fine, but that's always happened. I've lived here all my life. People from different countries come at any time. That's always happened," Vargas said. "I would fish [the river] since I was eight years old, people would cross, no one would bother you."

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, setting the country on a path to experience the greatest influx of illegal immigration in the past 20 years.

This fiscal year, which started in October, a total of 396,958 migrants have been apprehended at the southern border, according to the latest CBP data. Of them, about 317,590 migrants have been "expelled," turned away immediately at the border under a public health-related policy known as Title 42.

The majority of undocumented asylum-seeking migrants come from Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, fleeing violence and poverty. The inflow is overwhelming border patrol stations and processing facilities.

The migrant crisis comes as the Biden administration reviews asylum processing at the border with Mexico, undoing some of Trump's restrictive policies that targeted illegal immigration.

In his first formal presser on Thursday, Biden reaffirmed that the vast majority of migrants illegally entering the US border with Mexico are being sent back home. The president added

that he was trying to "determine the best way to keep people from coming" to the southern border. He also appointed Vice President Kamala Harris to lead the efforts with Mexico and Central America nations to stem the inflow of migrants.

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Biden Suggests 'Democratic' Alternative to China's Belt and Road Project

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters that he suggested to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson developing an international infrastructure project to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

"We talked about China and the competition they're engaging in the Belt and Road Initiative. And I suggested we should have, essentially, a similar initiative coming from the democratic states, helping those communities around the world that, in fact, need help," Biden told reporters about his Friday's conversation with Johnson.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a global strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to expand the country's economic and political influence through financing multiple infrastructure and development projects in nearly 70 countries and international organizations.

Biden said that he and Johnson also discussed climate change, bilateral cooperation and NATO engagements.

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US Has Over 18,000 Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Custody - Border Agency Data

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The US government has more than 18,000 unaccompanied migrant children in custody, marking a more than five percent one day jump, border agency data revealed.

The US as of Thursday has a total of 18,046 migrant children in custody, according to data released on Friday by the departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Homeland Security (DHS).

On Thursday, the US reported 17,056 unaccompanied migrant children in custody.

The United States is experiencing the greatest influx of undocumented migrants in the past 20 years.

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US Intelligence Sees Taliban Overrunning Afghanistan After Early Troops Withdrawal- Reports

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - US intelligence community warns the White House that Afghanistan could be taken over by the Taliban militants if American troops leave it before a power-sharing agreement, the New York Times reported.

"American intelligence agencies have told the Biden administration that if US troops leave before a power-sharing settlement is reached between the Taliban and the Afghan government, the country could fall largely under the control of the Taliban within two or three years after the withdrawal of international forces," the article said on Friday.

US President Joe Biden admitted that the withdrawal is unlikely be completed before the May 1 deadline and vowed to make it safe and orderly.

The Taliban threatened to resume attacks on foreign targets if the United States fails to comply with its Trump-era commitments.

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US Linguist Pleads Guilty to Passing Secret Data Overseas - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - A US citizen pleaded guilty to transmitting classified information to a foreign national intended for the Lebanese Hezbollah movement and now faces a sentence of life in jail, the US Justice Department said.

According to the statement, the prosecution believes that Mariam Taha Thompson, a 63-year-old former contract linguist at overseas US military facilities, shared with her co-conspirator the identities of at least ten clandestine human assets, at least 20 US targets, data on multiple tactics, techniques and procedures.

"Thompson jeopardized the lives of members of the US military as well as other individuals supporting the United States in a combat zone when she passed classified information to a person she knew was connected to Lebanese Hizbollah, a foreign terrorist organization which intended to use the information to hurt this country," Assistant Attorney General John Demers said on Friday.

During Friday's plea hearing, Thompson admitted that she communicated with her unindicted co-conspirator over a messaging application and developed a romantic interest in him.

The co-conspirator asked Thompson, who was assigned to a US special operations task force facility in Iraq, to provide "them" with information on human assets who helped the Americans to target and kill top Iranian commander Qasem Suleimani in early 2020. The defendant admitted that she understood "them" to be Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Lebanese military and political movement, according to the statement.

Thompson was arrested by the FBI on February 27, 2020. She faces a maximum sentence of up to life in jail, according to the Justice Department.

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Canadian Prosecutor Says Up to Government to Prove Search of Huawei CFO Reasonable

TORONTO, March 26 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is responsible for proving collecting information from Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou's electronic devices is reasonable and not a violation of her rights because it was obtained without a warrant, a Department of Justice prosecutor said.

Meng's defense team alleges 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.

"The burden is on the Attorney General of Canada to show that the collection of the ESN information, because [the defense] alleges it was a new search, it is our onus and our burden to persuade you on balance that it was reasonable," government attorney John Gibb-Carsley told the court on Friday.

Gibb-Carsley told British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Heather Holmes that there was no expectation of privacy with regard to the Electronic Serial Numbers information stamped on Meng's devices and that Canadian law enforcement officials had every right to obtain the serial numbers because of her arrest and subsequent seizure of electronic devices.

The Justice Department maintains that there was no way for the authorities to obtain a search warrant given that there was no active investigation of Huawei's Chief Financial Officer in Canada.

The government attorney also dismissed allegations from Meng's defense team that the collection of serial numbers three days after her initial detention on December 1 was a second warrantless search done at the behest of the FBI. Gibb-Carsley insisted that the collection of the serial numbers on December 1.

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. 4 was part of the proceedings initiated on December 1.

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UN Says Mission in South Sudan Fighting COVID-19 Outbreak as 409 Peacekeepers Infected

UNITED NATIONS, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) is in the midst of a coronavirus outbreak with more than 400 of its peacekeepers fighting the infection, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing.

"We have numbers of 409 affected people in the UN Mission in South Sudan," Haq said on Friday when asked about how many members in the mission have recently contracted the novel coronavirus.

The UN spokesman explained UNMISS is doing everything possible in order to prevent the coronavirus from spreading outside the mission, adding that the infected peacekeepers have been placed under quarantine.

"We took immediate action to keep the involved contingents separate from others and from the society around them," Haq said.

UNMIS said it has some 18,000 personnel on the ground in South Sudan.

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US Fines UK Man \$570M In for Bitcoin Fraud Scheme - Regulator

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - A US court ordered a UK man to pay more than \$570 million after finding he operated a bitcoin fraud scheme, the Commodity Futures Trading Commission said in a statement.

"The US District Court for the Southern District of New York entered a default judgment against Benjamin Reynolds, purportedly of Manchester, England, finding that he operated a fraudulent scheme to solicit bitcoin from members of the public and misappropriated customers' bitcoin," the release said Friday.

The court requires Reynolds to pay nearly \$143 million in restitution to defrauded customers and a civil penalty of \$429 million, the release said.

Reynolds solicited 22,190.542 bitcoin from more than 1,000 customers worldwide, including at least 169 individuals residing in the US, the release added.

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US Awards \$2.7B In Precision Rocket System Contract - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - US defense contractor Lockheed Martin won a contract worth more than \$2.7 billion for guided rocket systems and associated equipment and support, the Defense Department said in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control, Grand Prairie, Texas, was awarded a \$2,765,714,054 hybrid (cost-plus-fixed-fee and firm-fixed-price) contract for Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (GMLRS) Alternative Warhead rocket pods, GMLRS Unitary Warhead

rocket pods, Low-Cost Reduced Range Practice rocket pods, cybersecurity services, integrated product support and other services," the release said Friday.
Order completion date is October of 2024, the release added.

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US Hits Record By Administering 3.38Mln Vaccines in Single Day - White House

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The US authorities have administered a record 3.38 million coronavirus vaccines in a single day, White House COVID-19 Response Team Data Director Cyrus Shahpar said in a statement.

"A new daily record! +3.38M doses reported administered, over the total yesterday. 7-day average now 2.62Mln/day," Shahpar said via Twitter on Friday.

Prior to Friday, the seven-day average for administered coronavirus vaccines was about 2.5 million per day.

The United States is leading the world in the number of administered vaccines given that nearly 49 million residents have been inoculated, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data.

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Biden Says US Justice Dept. Looking Into Georgia Election Changes

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden told reporters that the US Justice Department is examining what it can do with respect to Georgia's new election law that alarmed and the country's Democrats.

"Well we're working on that right now. We don't know quite exactly what we can do at this point. The Justice Department is taking a look as well," Biden said on Friday.

On Thursday, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp introduced a measure for stricter identification requirements, limited ballot drop boxes and a shortened early voting period. Kemp said via Twitter that the law will make it "easy to vote and hard to cheat" in Georgia.

Biden criticized the Georgia law calling it "a blatant attack on the Constitution and good conscience." The US president warned that the changes will "deny people the right to vote."

The changes were enacted after criticism by Republicans about election and voter fraud in the past 2020 elections in which Democrats won in a traditionally Republican-leaning state.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) -

BIDEN'S INVITATION TO PUTIN, XI

* US President Joe Biden has invited 40 world leaders to the climate summit April 22-23, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping, the White House announced in a press release on Friday.

* Biden said he has not yet spoken to Putin and Xi about the upcoming global climate summit, but added that both are invited.

KOREAN PENINSULA DEVELOPMENTS

* The United States is in the final stages of its policy review on North Korea, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

* The Russian Foreign Ministry follows closely the developments on the Korean Peninsula, as the situation escalated there in light of the United States' and South Korea's military drills and North Korea's missile launches, ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told Sputnik on Friday.

SUEZ CANAL

* The United States is closely monitoring the situation in the Suez canal after a tanker got stuck and is blocking the waterway and has offered assistance to the government of Egypt to help reopen the canal, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

* An attempt to re-float the giant container ship Ever Given, which is grounded in the Suez Canal for several days, failed on Friday, the Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement (BSM) company, the ship's technical operator, said.

* The owner of the giant container ship Ever Given grounded in the Suez Canal for several days hopes that it will be brought afloat this weekend, the Kyodo News Agency reported.

RUSSIA'S INFORMATION SECURITY AGENDA

* Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday that there were many potential threats to global security and the sovereignty of individual countries in the information space.

* Putin called for intensifying Russia's participation in the negotiation process on information security issues, adding that the country is ready for constructive interaction with all partners, including via the United Nations.

* The Russian Security Council approved the draft foundations of the Russian state policy in the field of international information security, it will soon be submitted for the president's approval, Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev said.

US TROOPS WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

* If the United States delays the withdrawal process of its troops from Afghanistan it will have a negative impact on intra-Afghan negotiations, Russia's special presidential representative for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, told Sputnik on Friday.

* The Taliban movement announced readiness to start attacking foreign soldiers stationed in Afghanistan if the pullout of troops is not completed by the May 1 deadline as envisioned by the movement's 2020 deal with the United States.

TRAIN ACCIDENT IN EGYPT

* The collision between two trains in Egypt's southern Sohag province on Friday killed at least 32 people and injured over 60 others, the Health Ministry said.

* The deadly train collision in Egypt occurred after a passenger train suddenly stopped, as unidentified individuals pulled emergency cords, the Egyptian National Railways said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

Norway has delayed making a decision on the use of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine until mid-April, the NRK broadcaster reported on Friday, citing the Norwegian Institute of Public Health.

* Canada will receive the 1.5 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine loaned to Ottawa by the United States on March 30, Canada's Minister of Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand said on Friday.

* The Pentagon has administered more than 1.8 million vaccines to its personnel and more than 5 million vaccines as part of the FEMA mission to assist in the COVID-19 response, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs Terry Adirim said.

* About half of the 50 US states plan to open up vaccination eligibility to all adults by the middle of April, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said.

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Biden Invites 40 Leaders, Including Putin, Xi to Climate Summit April 22-23 - White House

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has invited several dozen world leaders to the climate summit next month, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping, the White House announced in a press release on Friday.

"Today, President Biden invited 40 world leaders to the Leaders Summit on Climate he will host on April 22 and 23," the release said. The President invited the following leaders to participate in the Summit:.. President Xi Jinping, People's Republic of China... President Vladimir Putin, The Russian Federation."

Other invitees include Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The White House explained the event will emphasize the urgency and the economic benefits of tougher action on climate change.

"In recent years, scientists have underscored the need to limit planetary warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius in order to stave off the worst impacts of climate change," the release said. "A key goal of both the Leaders Summit and COP26 will be to catalyze efforts that keep that 1.5-degree goal within reach. The Summit will also highlight examples of how enhanced climate ambition will

create good paying jobs, advance innovative technologies, and help vulnerable countries adapt to climate impacts."

The White House emphasized that by the time the summit is held, the United States will unveil an 2030 emissions target as its new Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Climate Agreement.

"In his invitation, the President urged leaders to use the Summit as an opportunity to outline how their countries also will contribute to stronger climate ambition," the release said.

The White House revealed that the topics to be addressed at the summit will include enhancing efforts by the world's major economies to reduce emissions to keep a limit of 1.5 degree Celsius within reach, mobilizing public and private sector finance to drive the net-zero transition as well as to help vulnerable countries cope with climate impacts.

"The economic benefits of climate action, with a strong emphasis on job creation, and the importance of ensuring all communities and workers benefit from the transition to a new clean energy economy," the release said. "Spurring transformational technologies that can help reduce emissions and adapt to climate change, while also creating enormous new economic opportunities and building the industries of the future."

The White House also said that while the summit will be held virtually, it will be live streamed for public viewing.

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World Bank, IMF Say Sudan Eligible for Assistance Under Enhanced HIPC Initiative

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - Sudan is eligible to receive debt relief assistance under the World Bank's and the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) program for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC), the two financial organizations said in a joint statement on Friday.

"The Executive Boards commended the authorities' sustained commitment to economic and institutional reforms under challenging circumstances and agreed that Sudan could be eligible for assistance under the Enhanced HIPC Initiative based on the preliminary assessment," the statement said.

The assessment represents an important step toward forgiveness by all creditors of most of Sudan's total external debt, the statement also said. In 2019, Sudan's debt exceeded \$49 billion, it noted.

"The steps taken so far, including arrears clearance and exchange-rate unification, will put Sudan on the path to substantial debt relief, economic revival, and inclusive development," World Bank Group President David Malpass said.

Malpass urged the international community to help Sudan in its development progress and welcomed Sudanese government's commitment to reforms.

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Biden Invites 40 Leaders, Including Putin, Xi to Climate Summit April 22-23 - White House

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Biden Says Hasn't Talked to Putin, Xi About Climate Summit, But Confirms Both Invited

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Friday that he has not yet spoken to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping about an upcoming global climate summit, but added that both leaders are invited.

"They know they're invited. But I haven't spoken to either one of them yet," Biden said when asked if he had invited Xi and Putin to next month's event.

The summit is expected to be held virtually and attended by around 40 world leaders.

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Pentagon Administered Over 1.8Mln Coronavirus Vaccines to Personnel - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense (DoD) has administered more than 1.8 million vaccines to its personnel and more than 5 million vaccines as part of the FEMA mission to assist in the COVID-19 response, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs Terry Adirim said in a briefing on Friday.

"We have administered more than 1.8 million shots within DoD and more than 5 million shots have gone into arms by a military service members in support of the FEMA mission," Adirim said.

The Defense Department has also implemented new guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and made fully vaccinated individuals exempt from quarantine and testing in case they were exposed to somebody with the novel coronavirus, Adirim said.

The Defense Department will make all its beneficiaries eligible for vaccination by May 1 in alignment with President Joe Biden's announcements that all Americans will get access to vaccines during that month, Adirim added.

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US Condemns China's Social Media Campaign Against Foreign Companies Over Xinjiang

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns China's social media campaign against US and other foreign companies who decided to avoid using certain products made in Xinjiang province over human rights violations there, US State Department spokesperson Jalina Porter said during a press briefing on Friday.

"We commend and stand with companies that adhere to US laws and ensure that products we are consuming are not made with forced labor," Porter told reporters.

The spokesperson said the US government urges all businesses to respect human rights in line with international law.

On Thursday, Facebook announced action against a group of hackers in China who were targeting dissidents, mostly ethnic Uyghurs from Xinjiang.

The hackers set up malicious websites that used look-alike domains for popular Uyghur and Turkish news sites or compromised legitimate websites frequently visited by their targets. Facebook said it found that the Chinese firms Beijing Best United Technology Co., Ltd. and Dalian 9Rush Technology Co., Ltd. are behind some of the malware used by the hackers.

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Biden Nominates 3 Assistant Secretaries of State - White House

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has announced his intent to nominate three Assistant Secretaries of State, the White House announced in a release on Monday.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate Daniel J. Kritenbrink to serve as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Brian A. Nichols to serve as an Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, and Brett M. Holmgren to serve as an Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research," the release said.

The White House pointed out that Kritenbrink is a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, class of Minister-Counselor, and has served as US Envoy to Vietnam since 2017.

"He was previously the Senior Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, and Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing," the release said. "In earlier tours in Beijing, he served as Political Minister Counselor, and as a Political Officer. Kritenbrink was Director of the Office of Chinese and Mongolian Affairs at the Department of State. He also served as a Political-Military officer at the US Embassy in Tokyo."

The White House said Nichols is also a career member of the Senior Foreign Service with the rank of Career Minister and presently serves as US Ambassador to Zimbabwe.

Nichols served as US Ambassador to Peru from 2014 to 2017 and served as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

The White House went on to say that Holmgren served as the Deputy for Nominations for the Biden-Harris Transition Team and as Co-Chair of the Intelligence Working Group for Biden for President.

"Earlier, Holmgren was Vice President for Technology Risk Management at Capital One Financial," the release added. "Prior to that, he was Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Intelligence Programs at the National Security Council, where he also previously served as Senior Policy Adviser to the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism," the release said.

Holmgren previously served as Special Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Director for Counterterrorism at the National Security Council and as political analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency, the release added.

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UPDATE - Ex-US Disease Control Chief Says He Thinks COVID-19 Escaped From Lab

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - Former US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Robert Redfield on Friday said he believes the COVID-19 virus escaped from a Chinese laboratory.

"I still think the most likely etiology of this pathology in Wuhan was from a laboratory [and it] escaped," Redfield told CNN. "Other people don't believe that. That's fine. Science will eventually figure it out."

China has repeatedly denied allegations that the virus came from a lab while the the World Health Organization (WHO) said the published genomic sequence proves its of natural origin. Redfield's theory backs what the Trump administration claimed for months during the height of the pandemic. Then-President Donald Trump repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the "China virus."

Redfield, who served as CDC chief under the Trump administration, said he was "not implying any intentionality" and reiterated that it was his "opinion."

The former CDC chief said he thinks the virus started transmitting somewhere in September and October of 2019, months before it became a global pandemic in March of 2020.

"I am a virologist," he continued. "I have spent my life in virology. I do not believe this somehow came from a bat to a human and at that moment in time, the virus came to the human, it became one of the most infectious viruses that we know in humanity for human-to-human transmission... It's not unusual for respiratory pathogens that are being worked on in a laboratory to infect the laboratory worker."

Redfield said normally when a pathogen goes from an animal to human, "it takes awhile for it to figure out how to become more and more efficient in human-to-human transmission."

But in the case of the COVID-19, multiple variants cropped up in just a year, including some that proved to be more transmissible than others.

Redfield said the virus was probably already developing during lab tests. Since the global outbreak of the COVID-19 in March 2020, the United States has been the country worst hit by the virus. More than 30 million Americans have been infected by it in the past year and nearly 550,000 have died from complications caused by it. The Trump administration came under fire from Democrats for claiming the virus came from a lab.

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Biden Invites Putin, Xi to Global Climate Talks - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden invited Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping to a global climate summit, AP reported citing officials on Friday.

The US hopes the summit will help speed up and deepen global efforts to cut fossil fuel pollution, the report added.

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FEATURE - 'Hard to See Them Drown': Texas Fisherman Sees Migrants Die as Border Police Stay Idle

EL PASO, March 26 (Sputnik) - A local fisherman in the southern Texas border town of Laredo — which sits nestled along the Rio Grande river that splits the US-Mexico frontier across the state — has a difficult time sleeping at night after he witnessed a group of migrants consumed by water after a grim struggle to cross turbulent border river as the police simply let them drown. Jesus Vargas, 50, shared with Sputnik video and photos documenting the incident that occurred on the afternoon of March 16, not far from a spot where he fishes.

The materials appear to show Vargas frustrated that several US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents on the scene watched the migrants drown and failed to make a rescue attempt. Some photos show a graphic image of the body of a deceased migrant floating in the river.

Sputnik was not able to interdependently verify the authenticity of the footage. The incident, however, comes as the US is on the path to face the greatest influx of undocumented migrants at the border with Mexico in the past 20 years.

"It's hard to see them drown. I have never seen anybody die and nobody did shit," Vargas said. "That's why I was pissed off because nobody had a life jacket for me or something. If they didn't want to go in the river, I would go."

'NO ONE HAD ANYTHING' FOR RESCUE

Vargas usually fishes Alligator gar that weigh more than 100 pounds and March 16 was no different: he was on his way to his usual fishing spot on the river when he witnessed the CBP responding to a smuggling attempt in his area. He said he grabbed his fishing rod and cast the fishing line to a migrant child who was drowning and pulled him to shore.

"How can a firefighter, police officer, or whoever, be saving animals but they don't want to save a human?" Vargas said. "No firefighters arrived, no ambulances arrived, nothing arrived. Not even the [border patrol] boat. I fish everyday and one of their boats - if you call saying there's a shooting, they're there in seconds."

Another thing that frustrated the Laredo resident is that the border agents who were at the scene lacked even the most primitive rescue devices at hand.

"My frustration was that no one had anything. Long before, [border patrol] had a throw rope, some footballs, they always had something with them, even life jackets," Vargas said. "A friend,

I won't tell you who, told me that when [then-President Donald] Trump came in he got rid of all that."

"I stayed traumatized with that video, I'm not lying, I still can't sleep," Vargas confessed. "I lay down and close my eyes, it's ugly to see that."

TROUBLED BORDER

The US Border Patrol Laredo Sector shared its own account of the March 16 events on the same day, saying that its agents had foiled a human smuggling attempt at the end of a road near the Rio Grande riverbanks.

"Agents witnessed several individuals exit a vehicle and attempt to swim across the Rio Grande river into Mexico," the statement said. "Several individuals were apprehended in the vehicle at encounter. Some individuals entered the river and safely made it to the Mexican riverbanks. One individual was rescued by a local fisherman and rendered first aid by agents. Two individuals succumbed to the dangerous currents of the Rio Grande river and perished."

The lifelong resident of Laredo said he has been fishing the Rio Grande river for about 48 years and has experienced the dangerous current that tumbles below the surface of the water.

"Below it's ugly, there's a current. Although on top you don't see anything, you can feel the current is moving you below," Vargas said.

The river has been the scene of many tragic events throughout Vargas' life, from illegal immigration to drug trafficking, he said.

"If they [migrants] find work, good, but if not - well there's no work. I know how it is in Mexico. Mexico has murderers, everything," Vargas said. "I've lived here nearby where they kill people right there on the edge of the river [Mexico side], they shoot them, cut their hands. I've seen it all here on the river my whole live. I'm not lying."

When asked how many undocumented migrants pass by his house on a daily basis, he said, "A bunch of them, man. I live about a block, block-and-a-half, and the river is right there."

Vargas said he's also witnessed about 17 migrants in an underground tunnel used for smuggling and also saw a car full of migrants fall in the river, killing everyone.

"I've found them drowned, tied, handcuffed. I've taken bodies out with their boots, belt, shirt, holes in their chest," Vargas said. "They've fallen off the train [near the river], their kids fall off...or they die."

BIDEN POLICY

Vargas suggested that President Joe Biden could allow migrants to come into the US through the ports of entry as a way to prevent tragic events, like the drowning, from happening, and to end human smuggling.

"Right now they're saying that a lot of migrants are coming to the United States, that's fine, but that's always happened. I've lived here all my life. People from different countries come at any time. That's always happened," Vargas said. "I would fish [the river] since I was eight years old, people would cross, no one would bother you."

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, setting the country on a path to experience the greatest influx of illegal immigration in the past 20 years.

This fiscal year, which started in October, a total of 396,958 migrants have been apprehended at the southern border, according to the latest CBP data. Of them, about 317,590 migrants have

been "expelled," turned away immediately at the border under a public health-related policy known as Title 42.

The majority of undocumented asylum-seeking migrants come from Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, fleeing violence and poverty. The inflow is overwhelming border patrol stations and processing facilities.

The migrant crisis comes as the Biden administration reviews asylum processing at the border with Mexico, undoing some of Trump's restrictive policies that targeted illegal immigration.

In his first formal presser on Thursday, Biden reaffirmed that the vast majority of migrants illegally entering the US border with Mexico are being sent back home. The president added that he was trying to "determine the best way to keep people from coming" to the southern border. He also appointed Vice President Kamala Harris to lead the efforts with Mexico and Central America nations to stem the inflow of migrants.

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US Strongly Condemns Houthi Attack on Oil Facilities in Saudi Arabia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States strongly condemns the latest Houthi attacks on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and regards the attacks as a provocation, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement on Friday.

"The United States again joins the international community in strongly condemning the attacks against Saudi Arabia that struck an oil facility in Jizan," the statement said. "The actions by the Houthis are a clear provocation meant to perpetuate the conflict."

On Thursday, Saudi Arabia said that a projectile fired by Houthi rebels had caused a fire at an oil terminal in the port city of Jazan. The attack came days after Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government announced a commitment to reach a ceasefire and engage in UN-led peace talks. Price denounced Houthis' actions as a "clear provocation meant to perpetuate the conflict" and another attempt to disrupt global energy supplies.

"The Houthis' actions are prolonging the suffering of the Yemeni people and jeopardizing peace efforts at a critical moment when the international community is increasingly united behind a ceasefire and a resolution of the conflict," he said.

"We again call on all parties to commit seriously to and strictly uphold a ceasefire, and engage in negotiations under UN auspices, in conjunction with UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths and US Special Envoy Tim Lenderking," Price added.

Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Saria told Al Almasirah channel on Friday that the Shia movement conducted a large operation against Saudi Arabia to mark the sixth anniversary of the Yemen war.

Saria said the Saudi oil company Aramco was hit with 12 drones and eight missiles, while more drones struck the kingdom's military targets, including the King Abdulaziz Air Base in the eastern city of Dammam.

Another Houthi spokesperson confirmed ongoing talks to resolve the conflict with the United Nations, the United States and Saudi Arabia under the mediation of Oman.

Six years ago, on March 26, a Saudi-led coalition launched an operation to support Yemeni government forces in the conflict with Houthi rebels. On Monday, Saudi Arabia proposed a widespread UN-sponsored ceasefire in Yemen and said that it was awaiting a response from the Houthis.

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UN Envoy on Myanmar Urges Military to Uphold Rights, Show Maximum Restraint - Statement UNITED NATIONS, March 26 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy on Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener on Friday called on the country's military to uphold the fundamental rights and demonstrate utmost restraint in the context of the anti-coup protests, the UN Spokesperson's Office said in a statement on Friday.

"The Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, remains deeply disturbed by ongoing violence committed by the country's security forces," the statement said. "The special envoy appeals for basic rights and democratic norms to be upheld in the greater interest of the nation's prosperity under civilian rule. The Special Envoy calls for maximum restraint."

Schraner Burgener said she believes the Myanmar military has turned against the country's citizens instead of ensuring peace and defending them.

Schraner Burgener also said she stands in solidarity with the people of Myanmar and their commitment to peace. She called on the military regime to release all detained officials, including President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

On February 1, Myanmar's military overthrew the civilian government and declared a year-long state of emergency. The military also arrested the State Counselor and the President over alleged electoral fraud and later, on charges of violating COVID-19 restrictions.

The coup triggered mass protests that continue for the sixth week. Over 70 percent of government employees have now joined the civil disobedience movement in the country.

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Canada to Receive 1.5 Mln 'Loaned' AstraZeneca Vaccines From US Tuesday - Minister

TORONTO, March 26 (Sputnik) - Canada will receive the 1.5 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine loaned to Ottawa by the United States on March 30, Canada's Minister of Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand said on Friday.

"The 1.5 million AstraZeneca doses from the United States... I can now confirm, will arrive in Canada this coming Tuesday by truck," Anand told reporters.

The United States, which currently sits on 30 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, has agreed to loan the 7 million vaccine doses to Canada, Mexico and other nations while the country's health regulators work to assess its safety and efficacy.

Anand said Canada will receive 6 million coronavirus vaccine doses in the next three weeks and touted Canadian government's efforts to procure vaccines from a variety of suppliers, including the United States, India and the COVAX facility. Ottawa, however, has been criticized for being the only G7 country to draw from the facility that is intended to ensure equitable distribution of vaccines to developing nations.

Despite inking deals with numerous vaccine manufacturers, the Trudeau government has faced sharp criticism for a muted vaccine rollout program that has been labeled a failure by opposition parties as well as the majority of Canadians, according to the latest polls.

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US in Final Stages of North Korea Policy Review - White House

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is in the final stages of its policy review on North Korea, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Friday. "We are in final stages of our intensive multi-stakeholder North Korea policy review," Psaki said. "We are, of course, discussing our review with the National Security Advisers of South Korea and Japan at our trilateral dialogue coming up next week and those consultations are an important part of our review process."

South Korean President Moon Jae-in on Friday announced the importance of further attempts to continue a dialogue with the United States and North Korea, noting that Seoul can protect itself from any provocations.

The statement came as North Korea conducted two missile tests in recent days. The first was carried out on Sunday when two cruise missiles were launched toward the Yellow Sea. The second test was on Thursday, with two ballistic missiles launched toward the Sea of Japan. The South Korean president said that with an ever stronger defense capability and in inviolable alliance with the United States, the country is ready to ensure security and is capable of repelling any provocation.

The dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang has been stalled since the failed February 2019 summit in Hanoi, during which the United States demanded more decisive steps from North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and Pyongyang accused the US of not responding to the already taken steps. The 2019 October talks in Sweden failed to break the deadlock. The inter-Korean dialogue is also at a low point following North Korea's decision to cut all lines of communication with Seoul last June.

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UN Chief, UNGA President to Meet on Friday to Discuss Ethiopia, Syria, Myanmar - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and UN General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir will meet later on Friday to discuss a wide range of issues, including the situation in Ethiopia, Syria and Myanmar, the President's spokesperson Brenden Varma said in a press briefing.

"The President will hold his regular coordination meeting with the Secretary-General today," Varma said on Friday. "Expected topics of discussion include the work of the General Assembly, Syria, Myanmar, Ethiopia, UN development system reform... and the effects of COVID-19 on business continuity."

Earlier on Friday, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said the UN Secretary-General had welcomed Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's announcement that Eritrea will withdraw its troops from the Tigray region.

Guterres also welcomed the decision by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to deploy a mission into Tigray to investigate alleged violations amid the ongoing crisis that started last November.

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Date for Japan's Prime Minister Visit to US Has Not Been Set Yet - White House.

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The date for Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's visit to the United States has not been set yet, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

"We look forward to welcome Prime Minister to Washington soon, the date hasn't been formally set yet," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki also said US President Joe Biden has not received yet an invitation to the Olympic Games in Tokyo scheduled to be held later this year.

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US Closely Monitors Situation in Suez Canal, Offers Assistance to Egypt - White House

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is closely monitoring the situation in the Suez canal after a tanker got stuck and is blocking the waterway and has offered assistance to the government of Egypt to help reopen the canal, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

"We are tracking the situation very closely," Psaki said during a press briefing. "We understand that Egyptian officials are working to remove the tanker as soon as possible and continue traffic. As part of our active diplomatic dialogue with Egypt, we offered US assistance to the Egyptian authorities to help reopen the canal."

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Blinken, Guterres Will Deliver Open Remarks Prior to Meeting on Monday - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will deliver public remarks on Monday before holding a virtual meeting, United Nations spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Friday.

On March 29, Blinken will conduct a virtual visit to the United Nations in New York to meet the organization's officials and chair a UN Security Council meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

"They [Guterres, Blinken] will have opening remarks to the press prior to their meeting, and there will be a webcast," Haq said.

Blinken will also meet virtually with the President of the UN General Assembly, Volkan Bozkir, to discuss the US engagement in the United Nations, the importance of multilateralism and areas of mutual concern, according to Bozkir's spokesperson Brenden Varma.

The meeting will also start after the two officials deliver open remarks, he said.

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US Reports 7% Increase in 7-Day Average Number of Coronavirus Cases - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has seen a 7 percent increase in the seven-day average number of people who have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said in a briefing on Friday.

"The most recent seven-day average is about 57,000 cases per day, which is an increase of 7 percent from the prior seven days," Walensky said. "The most recent seven-day average of new hospitalizations about 47 hundred per day represents also a slight increase from the prior seven-day period."

Walensky also noted that the death rate from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) remains at the same level as slightly more than a thousand deaths is reported per day.

The US authorities have reported more than 30 million novel coronavirus cases and nearly 547,000 virus-related deaths, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

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Gunman in Colorado Grocery Store Shooting Used Legally Purchased Gun - Police Chief

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The suspect in the deadly Colorado grocery store mass shooting used a legally purchased gun, Boulder Police Chief Maris Herold told reporters on Friday.

"The firearm used by the suspect... is a semiautomatic Ruger AR-556 pistol. It was legally purchased in a gun store in Arvada, Colorado. The defendant was also in possession of a 9 millimeter handgun, but at this time we do not believe this gun was used in this incident," Herold said during a press briefing.

Ten people, including a police officer, were killed in the shooting at a supermarket in Boulder on Monday. The suspect, 21-year-old Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa, has been charged with ten counts of first degree murder and one count of attempted murder.

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US B-1 Bombers Accomplished First Ever Landing in Arctic Circle - Air Force

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - A group of US B-1 bomber aircraft have accomplished the first ever landing in the Arctic Circle as well as in Poland as part of the most recent Bomber Task Force mission, the US Air Force said in a release on Friday.

"The B-1s accomplished a number of historic firsts during this deployment. They were the first bombers to deploy to Norway, land in the Arctic Circle and land in Poland where they conducted the first hot-pit refuel of a B-1 in Europe, demonstrating a critical agile combat employment capability," the release said.

The Air Force explained the group of B-1 bombers conducted nine sorties while integrating with other NATO allies' aircraft from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Germany and Italy. Another US bomber, a B-2 Spirit, accomplished its final mission as part of Bomber Task Force on March 25.

Earlier this month, two US bombers and four Norwegian F-35 fifth generation jets conducted a Bomber Task Force near the coast of Iceland and another four US bombers conducted a mission near Iceland.

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Ottawa Says Assured by EU New Vaccine Export Rules Will Not Affect Canada

TORONTO, March 26 (Sputnik) - Ottawa has received assurances from Brussels that coronavirus vaccine shipments destined for Canada would not be impacted by the European Union's new export rules, Global Affairs Canada said on Friday.

The European Commission announced on Wednesday a set of measures seeking to toughen vaccine export controls by introducing new criteria such as reciprocity and proportionality, amid continuing shortfalls of vaccine supplies from manufacturers.

"Executive Vice President Dombrovskis reiterated that the EU's measures are focused on ensuring transparency and a balanced approach to vaccination roll-out, and are not meant to target Canada," Global Affairs Canada said in a statement following a meeting between Canadian Trade Minister Mary Ng and her EU counterpart Valdis Dombrovskis.

Ng brought her case before senior bloc officials during meetings earlier this week, asking the European Union to continue to allow shipments to Canada. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also raised the issue in a call with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

Canada's concern about further vaccine delays comes amid setbacks for Trudeau government's vaccination plan this week.

On Thursday, Canadian officials admitted that Moderna has informed them that it has delayed the shipment of about 600,000 coronavirus vaccine doses and there are reports that Ottawa is not ready to receive and distribute the 1.5 million doses allotted to Canada by the Biden administration.

Despite inking deals with numerous vaccine manufacturers, the Trudeau government has faced sharp criticism for a muted vaccine rollout program that has been labeled a failure by opposition parties and the majority of Canadians, according to the latest polls.

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Half of US States to Open Up Vaccine Eligibility to All Adults by Mid-April - White House

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - About half of the 50 US states plan to open up vaccination eligibility to all adults by the middle of April, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said during a briefing on Friday.

"Forty six states and the District of Columbia have already announced plans to open up eligibility no later than May 1," Zients said. "About half the states will open up eligibility to all adults by mid-April."

Zients said 14 states at present have opened up eligibility to all adults or have plans to do so in the next week while 12 additional states will open up eligibility by April 15.

White House also shared its plans to increase the number of active duty troops engaged in the vaccination across the United States from 2900 to over 6000 in the coming weeks.

More than 44 million people have been fully vaccinated in the United States, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

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US to Hold First Ever West Africa Joint Counterterrorism Exercise March 29 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will conduct in late March the first ever joint counterterrorism exercise in West Africa together with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the US State Department said in a media note on Friday.

"Events are planned to take place separately within each of the three West African nations, with cross-border coordination practiced where appropriate," the note said.

The State Department explained that the exercise, called West Africa Joint Operations (WAJO), was designed to connect counterterrorism investigators with their judicial counterparts in three nations.

"The WAJO regional exercise is partly modeled on successful East Africa Joint Operations exercises that have taken place since 2014, while the West Africa exercise is focused on security concerns more specific to the nations in that region," the note said.

The exercise is scheduled for March 29-31 and includes elements from several recent real-world incidents, according to the State Department.

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US Resists Venezuela's Efforts at WTO to Challenge Sanctions Regime - Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States blocked Venezuela's attempt at the World Trade Organization to challenge Washington's sanctions against Caracas, Office of the US Trade Representative spokesperson Adam Hodge said on Friday.

"The United States exercised its rights as a WTO member to object to this illegitimate panel request because representatives of the [Nicolas] Maduro regime do not speak on behalf of the Venezuelan people," Hodge said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, media reported that Venezuela sought the WTO form a panel to rule whether US sanctions against the country violate global trading rules. The United States asked for the request to be removed, Venezuela refused, which prompted WTO to suspend a meeting on the matter.

"The United States will reject any effort by Maduro to misuse the WTO to attack US sanctions aimed at restoring human rights and democracy to Venezuela," Hodge said.

The United States has imposed multiple rounds of sanctions on Venezuela since 2018 as it refuses to recognize the legitimacy of the Maduro presidency.

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UNHCR Says Mission Reaches 2 Camps in Ethiopia's Tigray Region for 1st Time Since November

UNITED NATIONS, March 26 (Sputnik) - The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in a statement on Friday that its mission has accessed two refugee camps in Ethiopia's Tigray region for the first time since the start of the conflict there five months ago.

"The UN Refugee Agency has gained access to the Shimelba and Hitsats refugee camps in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region for the first time since November 2020, amid ongoing security concerns," the statement said.

According to the statement, a joint mission conducted by UNHCR and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs found both camps completely destroyed and all the humanitarian facilities looted and vandalized.

The UN Refugee agency said it was deeply concerned for the well-being of the Eritrean refugees residing in the Hitsats camp, where most of the shelters in one area were burnt to the ground.

Of some 20,000 refugees who lived in the two camps before the conflict, more than 7,000 have reached the other two Eritrean refugee camps Mai Aini and Adi Harush.

The mission also visited the town of Shiraro, where some 95,000 refugees are understood to be scattered in the area and require urgent aid.

The agency said all of the displaced in Shiraro and Shimelba are in need of life-saving assistance and called on all parties to urgently enable the free and safe movement of affected people.

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US Urges Holding Responsible Terrorists for Attacks in Northern Mozambique - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has denounced the terrorist attacks against civilians in Mozambique and urged to hold those involved accountable, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"The United States strongly condemns the terrorist attacks and violence against civilians in Cabo Delgado province in northern Mozambique," Price said in a statement. "We call for an immediate end to the violence and for those responsible to be held accountable to the full extent of the law."

Price said the attacks demonstrate a complete disregard for the local population and underscored that the United States is committed to working with Mozambique's government to combat terrorism and ensure security for all its citizens and residents.

"Our thoughts are with the people of Mozambique as they confront this crisis," Price said.

The situation in northern Mozambique continues to deteriorate with a quarter of the population displaced and instances of atrocities by the al-Shabab terror group and clashes between terrorists and government forces.

Al-Shabab terror has been spreading terror for more than three years in the northern province of Cabo Delgado, which borders Tanzania, an area rich in natural gas.

The violence in Cabo Delgado province has forced 670,000 people to run for their lives since 2017 with over 500,000 people displaced over the past year. More than 2,600 people were killed in the conflict, including 1,312 civilians, according to reports.

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Canada to Potentially Hit 1Mln Coronavirus Cases By Beginning of April - Health Officials

TORONTO, March 26 (Sputnik) - Canadian health officials project that the country is on track to hit 1 million coronavirus cases by the beginning of April, an updated epidemiology and modeling report revealed on Friday.

Officials project up to an additional 53,458 cases and more than 525 coronavirus-related deaths in the next ten days, the report said.

The number of Canadians who will have tested positive for the novel coronavirus will range between 973,080 and 1,005,020 while the number of deaths is expected to fall in the 22,875 to 23,315 range by April 4, the Public Health Agency of Canada said.

Canadian health officials report a steady rise in daily new case averages, with an average of 4,100 new cases during the last seven days, up from a plateaued caseload of 2,500 one month ago.

As of Friday, the agency has reported more than 953,000 cases and more than 22,800 coronavirus-related fatalities.

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At Least 6 People Dead After Multiple Tornadoes Hit 3 US Southern States - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - At least six people have died after more than 20 tornadoes hit the US states of Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia, ABC News reported on Friday.

One person died in Coweta County, Georgia, while another five lost their lives in Calhoun County, Alabama, the report said.

Three victims were from one family in a situation where a 13-year-old girl survived but lost her mother and grandparents, the report said referring to information from local Sheriff Matthew Wade.

On Thursday, the National Weather Service issued a high risk warning of violent tornadoes for the southern portion of the United States.

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

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Dominion Voting Systems Sues Fox News for \$1.6Bln Over Election Fraud Claims - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) – Dominion Voting Systems has filed a lawsuit against Fox News seeking more than \$1.6 billion in damages over claims the cable channel broadcast about the company during the 2020 presidential election, a court filing showed on Friday.

"Fox, one of the most powerful media companies in the United States, gave life to a manufactured storyline about election fraud that cast a then-little-known voting machine company called Dominion as the villain," the company's lawyers said in a complaint filed in the Superior Court of the State of Delaware.

The lawsuit seeks \$1.6 billion in damages for lost profits and diminished enterprise value, along with reimbursement for \$600,000 in security expenses and \$700,000 in fees for combating disinformation spread by the TV news network.

Dominion in a press release said it made over 30 attempts to notify Fox producers, content managers and hosts that its claims were false and sent two letters demanding retractions on November 20 and December 22.

"The network endorsed, repeated, and broadcast a series of verifiably false, yet devastating, lies about Dominion. Fox's viral disinformation campaign reached over a billion people worldwide and caused enormous harm to Dominion," Dominion's lawyer Tom Clare said in the release.

Another Dominion lawyer, Stephen Shackelford, said the defamation campaign was an attempt by Fox News to increase and win back its viewers as well as to compete for the attention of President Donald Trump.

Dominion Voting Systems has also filed lawsuits against Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani, lawyer Sidney Powell and the CEO of MyPillow Michael Lindell over their election fraud claims.

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US Provides \$1.15Bln Bridge Loan to Help Sudan Clear Arrears at World Bank – Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has provided Sudan with a \$1.15 billion bridge loan to help the heavily indebted country clear its arrears at the World Bank and seek a broader debt relief package, the US Treasury Department said on Friday.

"In recognition of the progress Sudan has made, yesterday Treasury provided same-day bridge financing of approximately \$1.15 billion to help Sudan clear its arrears at the World Bank, at no cost to US taxpayers," the Treasury said in a statement.

This effort will help Sudan normalize its relationship with the international community and will support long-term economic growth for the benefit of the Sudanese people, the Treasury added.

"It's an action that will move Sudan one step closer to securing much needed-debt relief and help the nation reintegrate into the international financial community," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in the statement.

The Treasury will continue to work with international partners to support Sudan's reform agenda and efforts to secure debt relief in 2021, the statement added.

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CORRECTION - US Provides \$1.15Bln Bridge Loan to Help Sudan Clear Arrears at World Bank - Treasury

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Blinken to Co-Host Virtual Meeting of Anti-IS Coalition Ministers on March 30 - State Dept

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday will co-chair a meeting of top diplomats of the US-led coalition in Iraq and Syria to discuss ways to sustain their campaign against the Islamic State (banned in Russia) terror group, the State Department said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will join Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sophie Wilmes in co-hosting a virtual meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Small Group on March 30 to review continuing efforts in the campaign to achieve the enduring defeat of ISIS," the State Department said in a press release. The participants of the meeting will discuss ways to maintain pressure on the remaining terrorists in Iraq and Syria, and to combat IS networks in other countries, according to the release.

"They will also assess priorities for the Coalition's lines of effort related to stabilization, foreign terrorist fighters, counter-ISIS financing, and counter-messaging efforts," the release said. "The 83-member Global Coalition, of which the United States is a leading member, remains unwavering in its commitment to the enduring and global defeat of ISIS."

The US-led coalition of more than 60 nations has been carrying out airstrikes and other operations against the Islamic State in Iraq since August 2014 and in Syria since September 2014. However, the coalition has acted in Syria without the approval of the Syrian government or the UN Security Council.

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US Provides \$1.16Bln Bridge Loan to Help Sudan Clear Arrears at World Bank - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has provided Sudan with a \$1.5 billion bridge loan to help the heavily indebted country clear its arrears at the World Bank and seek a broader debt relief package, the US Treasury Department said on Friday.

"In recognition of the progress Sudan has made, yesterday Treasury provided same-day bridge financing of approximately \$1.15 billion to help Sudan clear its arrears at the World Bank, at no cost to US taxpayers," the Treasury said in a statement.

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Blinken to Chair UN Security Council Meeting on Syria on March 29 - State Dept

WASHINGTON, March 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken will pay a virtual visit to the United Nations on Monday to meet UN officials and chair a Security Council meeting

on the humanitarian situation in war-torn Syria, State Department spokesperson Ned Price announced on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel virtually to New York City on March 29 to chair a meeting of the UN Security Council, meet with UN officials, and meet with the staff of the United States Mission to the United Nations," Price said in a statement. "Blinken will chair a Security Council meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria where he will reinforce the United States' support for the Syrian people, for a nationwide ceasefire, and for unhindered access that will allow humanitarian assistance to reach vulnerable communities throughout the country."

During the virtual visit, Blinken will meet with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to discuss outstanding Security Council matters, the need for reform of the United Nations system, and future opportunities for US engagement with the international body.

Blinken will also meet with President of the UN General Assembly Volkan Bozkir for talks on the upcoming 76th UNGA and other matters of bilateral and global concern, Price said.

He will also meet with Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield and the personnel of the US Mission to the United Nations.

Blinken's visit to the United Nations aims to reaffirm Washington's commitment to work through the multilateral system to address global challenges. It also builds on recent US actions to rejoin the UN framework, including its re-entry into the Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization, Price said.

According to data published by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 6 million people are displaced within Syria, and as many as 6.6 million Syrians have fled the country as refugees since 2011.

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